casual connect

Winter 2013

CASUAL GAMES ASSOCIATION

RUBY SEVEN STUDIOS

In 2012, while the world was ending,* we were shipping over a dozen titles on 4 platforms... Here's to 2013!

*according to some sources

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Letter from the Director

So I had this great idea of what I wanted to write in this issue of *Casual Connect.* And then the more I thought about it, the more I came to realize that it was really a bad idea. To be honest, it sucked.

Then it occurred to me that at this very moment, any number of you are struggling with that same problem: sketching out ideas and then crumpling up the paper; drawing pictures that no one will ever see; writing story lines (or lines of code) that will never see the light of day. For every great idea we come up with, there must be dozens—hundreds—*thousands* even that aren't worth the synapses that fired them into existence.

Even so, we keep scribbling and coding and drawing because eventually all of those bad ideas lead to a pretty good one. And when we turn a pretty good idea over to a team of talented, motivated gamemakers, *good* more often than not turns into *great.*

It's one of the reason we're in the business, isn't it? Working on casual games entitles us to associate with people who place a premium on great ideas, people who spend much of their in-between-time trying to come up with an even better concept than the great one they spend most of their other hours trying to perfect. All you have to do is spend a few minutes trolling the game sites or strolling the hallways at one of our conferences (or reading this magazine) and you realize that there is still plenty of genius to go around.

Even as I write this, no doubt one of you is skyping with a buddy halfway across the world, sharing some preliminary thoughts freshly scribbled on a piece of loose leaf—and eight or nine months from now the rest of us are going to look on in wonder at what you've created, shaking our heads and muttering, "I wish I had thought of that."

So please: Keep those synapses firing.

Jessica

Jessica Tams, *Director of the Casual Games Association*
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EVENT CALENDAR

12-14 February 2013
Casual Connect Europe

Congress Center Hamburg
Marseiller Straße 1
Hamburg, 20355
Germany

21-23 May 2013
Casual Connect Asia

Shangri-La Hotel
22 Orange Grove Road
258350, Singapore

30-31 July & 1 August 2013
Casual Connect San Francisco

Hilton San Francisco
Union Square
333 O'Farrell St.,
San Francisco, CA 94102

October 2013
Casual Connect Kyiv

RUS Hotel
4 Hospitalna St.
Kyiv, 01601
Ukraine

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Kevin Cerda is the game designer and something like a CEO for the indie developing studio BeautiFun Games. He's a really young developer with a deep interest on narrative, creating new gameplay mechanics and delivering great experiences to the players.

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Lesta Studio
Saint Petersburg, Russia

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Dr. Lober is a lawyer and partner with the German firm Schulte Riesenkampff in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. He has worked in the gaming industry since 1991 and ran one of the first commercial online magazines for computer games in the 1990s. He studied in Germany and France and wrote his thesis about youth protection in computer games. He is also the founder of bgf - browser-games forum.

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Shailesh has been designing games for over 9 years. He has worked as a game designer and producer for various high profile titles such as *HUEBRIX, It's Just a Thought, Finger Footie, Maria Sharapova Tennis* and many more.

Mumbai, India

About the Cover

Mike Sorrenti

Mike Sorrenti is the president and lead producer at Game Pill Interactive. He is the creator of *Mimo* and the upcoming series of *Sasquatch* games. Rob Finlay is a Flash artist at Game Pill Interactive. Rob was instrumental in helping to establish the style for *Sasquatch Survivor*—an adventure physics title. Rob has worked closely with Mike on the first title in the *Sasquatch* series and will be lending a hand on future releases featuring the world, characters and folklore of the Sasquatch civilization.

The idea for the cover was collaboration between Mike and Rob. "We both agreed that *Mimo* and the *Sasquatch* world would be great subject matter at the onset." The emotion of the cover is the idea of coming home for the holidays. "No matter where you are from, the holidays are a time to connect with loved ones." The cover depicts Mimo coming home to his family and friends. It seeks to capture the moment he first catches sight of them. The hat is a nod to jolly St. Nick.

By the Numbers

A Week in the Life of a Mobile Game Launch

One of the top questions we get from game developers is how our network dynamics change throughout the week. One could probably guess that Saturday is the best day all-around for mobile games: users are more likely to be playing and more likely to download new games, so advertisers are willing to pay the most for Saturday traffic. Looking at trends throughout the week, Chartboost's numbers prove that this is true—but they also reveal some other interesting tidbits that advertisers and publishers alike will find helpful in planning their week-to-week strategy.

BID PRICES

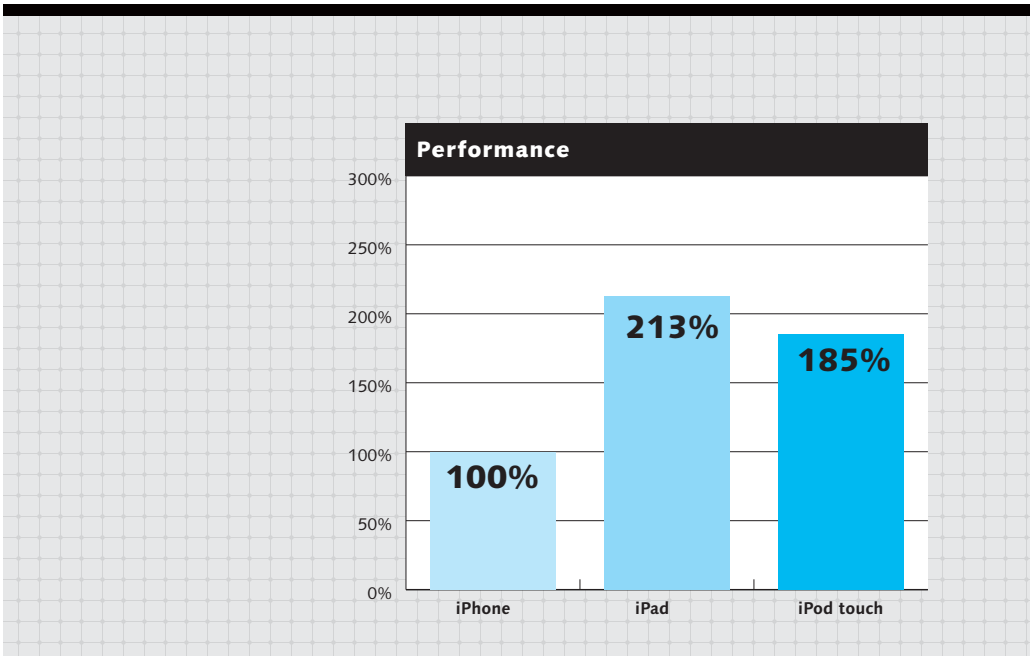
- In order to maximize the traffic/bid ratio, developers should advertise Monday through Wednesday—they'll have the least expensive competition. There will be fewer overall impressions available due to low weekday app usage, but advertisers can capture a larger portion of that traffic than they would with the same bid later in the week.
- Unsurprisingly, bids are highest over the weekend when users are most active on their devices. CPC bids peak on Saturday at 4% higher than the average CPC bid.
- CPC bids spike on Thursdays as advertisers begin weekend launch campaigns and remain high until they decline on Sunday in anticipation of a return to the workweek. This is not too surprising considering that *Wednesday is the most popular day to launch an app,* giving the developer time to ramp up their bids going into the weekend.
- CPI bids (not graphed) follow a similar trend to CPC bids throughout the week, but the day of the week variation is dampened (CPI bids peak at 2% over the average on Saturdays, compared to 7% over average for CPC bids). This is due to the fact that advertisers use aggressive CPC campaigns to launch their apps and use less risky CPI bids for set-it-and-forget-it sustainment campaigns.
- Despite high engagement and ad performance, bids on Sunday are just about average compared to the rest of the week—and 4% lower than Saturday.

TRAFFIC

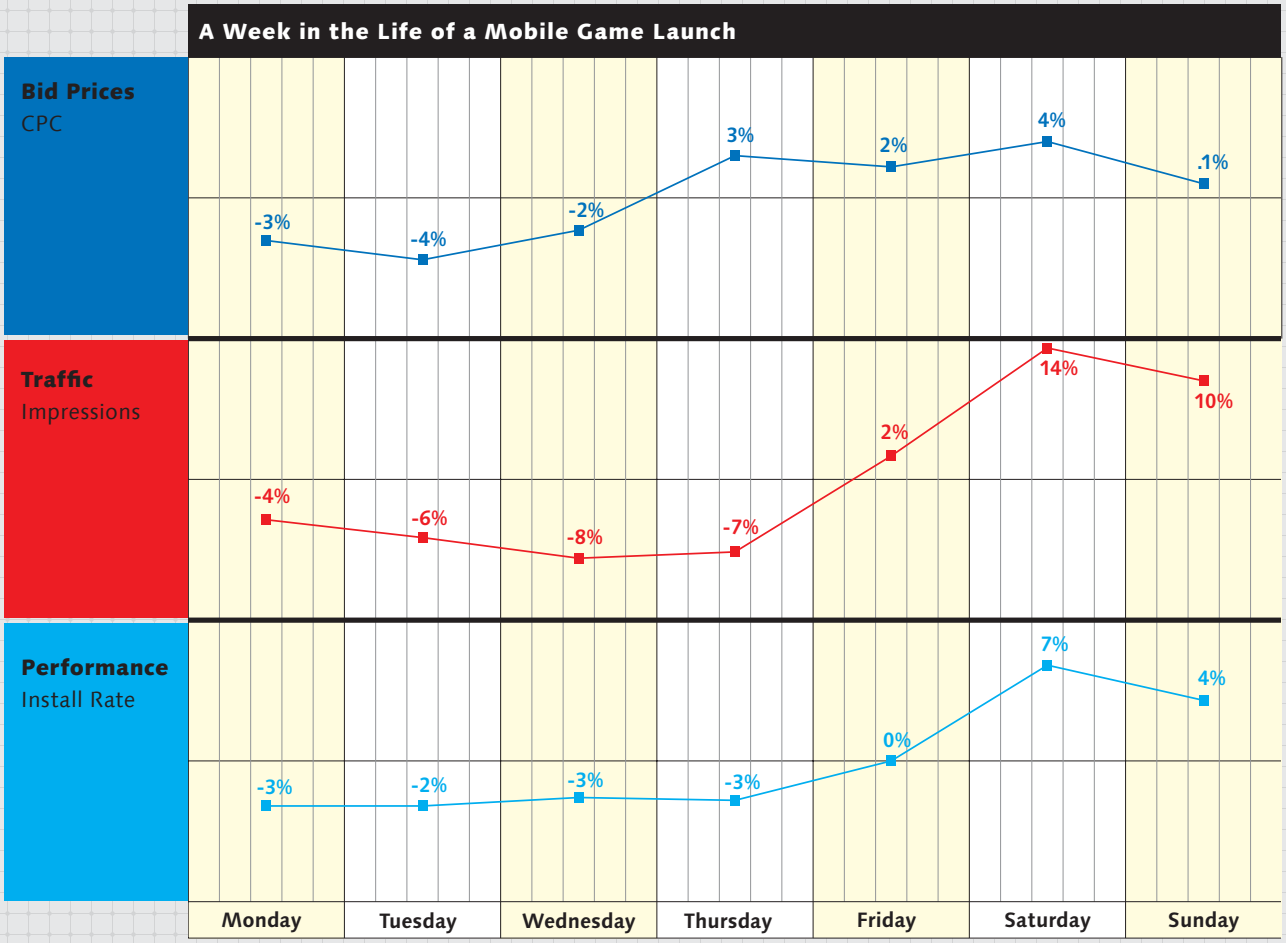
- Impressions are strongly correlated with user sessions, so they are the highest on days when users are playing games more often. The greatest number of impressions served in a week is generally on Saturday, with 14% more traffic available than on an average day. Wednesdays are the slowest, with 8% less traffic than the average day.

PERFORMANCE

- Click-through rates (not graphed) are fairly steady throughout the week, varying less than 2% each day on average. So regardless of when users see an interstitial, essentially they're equally likely to click it.
- Users are most likely to install and launch a new app during the weekend. Presumably, they have more time to follow through on installing and launching apps on weekends than they do on weekdays.
- **Performance across iOS devices:** Users on iPod touch and iPad appear to be much more eager than their iPhone counterparts to download games. iPad users are more than twice as likely as iPhone users to ultimately download a game after seeing an interstitial for it, while iPod Touch users are 85% more likely. ❊



by Pepe Agell; *Sr. Director, Publisher Relations, Chartboost;* **San Francisco, CA**



A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Nightmare Realm vs. Nightmare Realm 2

Julia Gurchenkova started dreaming of becoming an artist from early childhood, and this wish determined her course in life. In 2007, when she graduated as an artist from Novosibirsk State Academy of Architecture and Art, she entered the casual games industry as CG artist for Alawar. Not long thereafter, Julia moved to Saint Petersburg and joined the ranks of Lesta Studio as lead artist for casual games projects. Now, five years later, she is Art Director of the studio's casual games department.

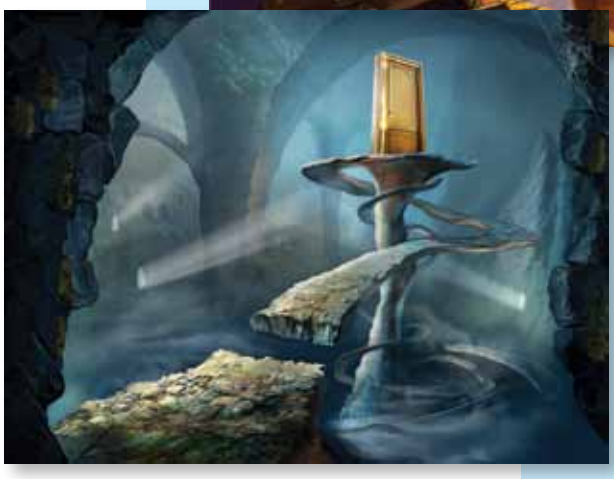
NIGHTMARE REALM

RELEASED: July 2011
PUBLISHER: Big Fish Games
DEVELOPER: Lesta Studio

Solve the mystery of the family's secret and save 7-year-old Emily from the imaginary world of Nightmare Realm.

The title was rated the second-most-popular adventure game of the year according to the Big Fish Games portal. Also, the online editorial site, Gamezebo.com, ranked *Nightmare Realm* as one of its Top 10 hidden object games for 2011.

The game also has a Mac version and has been localized into nine of the world's popular languages.



STYLE
We reviewed numerous references, looking for the project's personal style. Inspired by the aesthetic of various underground movies (such as *Coraline*), we decided to make a kind of gloomy and mysterious fairytale using a somewhat doll-like (but still realistic) style.

by Julia Gurchenkova; *Art Director, Lesta Studio;*
Saint Petersburg, Russia

Lesta Studio Team

TEAM

Initially, development was started by a team of four. During the year of development, the team doubled in size twice, which allowed us to speed up the workflow. We believe that the ideas and enthusiasm of the team is what made *Nightmare Realm* special in gamers' eyes.

By now the team consists of 12 professionals: a producer (who is the game designer as well), two programmers, six artists, two animators and a VFX composer. Such growth required significant investment in tools and technology while allowing us to discover new horizons of creativity. This line-up has also enabled the development of two parallel projects.

NIGHTMARE REALM 2

RELEASED: December 2012
PUBLISHER: Big Fish Games
DEVELOPER: Lesta Studio

Ten years have passed, and the characters have forgotten the terrible events of a decade ago. Now they are challenged to come back into Nightmare Realm, fight dark forces again and finally close the chapter on the family's tribulations.

STYLE

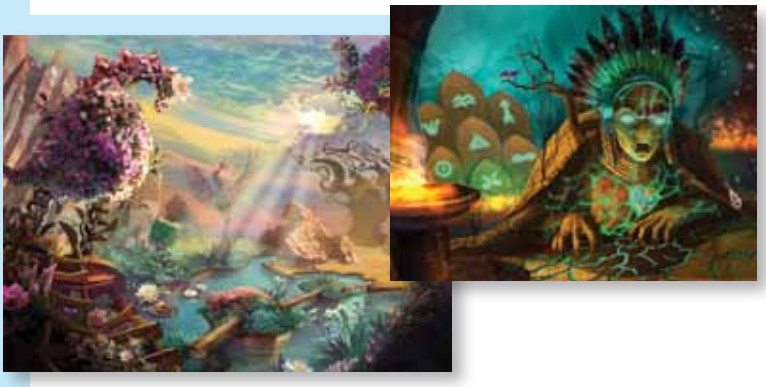
Nightmare Realm 2 is sunk into a noticeably gloomier atmosphere than its predecessor. There were a few important factors that led us to this decision. On the one hand, many fans of the first part made a point of its cartoonish style and asked us to deliver more of a thrill-and-horror atmosphere in the sequel. On the other hand, we felt that we had grown up since the release of *Nightmare Realm*—just like its characters did. Consequently, we wanted the second part to remain a fairytale—but a fairytale for adults.

Nightmare Realm vs. *Nightmare Realm 2*

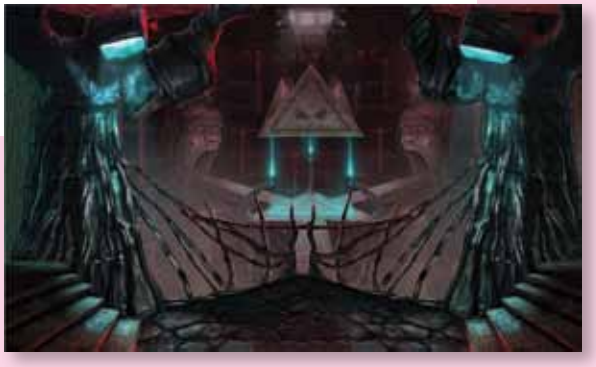
LOCATIONS

PORTAL
We spent plenty of time exploring the appearance of the Portal, one of the game's key-locations which carries player into Nightmare Realm. Finally we merged two seemingly incompatible references: *Edward Scissorhands,* the movie by Tim Burton, and Gaudy's architecture masterpieces.

VALLEY
Through a player's efforts, the arid valley can blossom into one of the most beautiful locations of Nightmare Realm. We wanted every detail to look unique and special. Somewhat inspired by our favorite movies (such as *Lovely Bones*), we totally gave in to surrealistic fantasies: giant, dinosaur-like bushes with springs for legs, bottle wind chimes, clocks running counterclockwise, and so on.



PALETTE
Because no two artists have a common style, we developed an approach that would help ensure consistency as the different parts of *Nightmare Realm* were developed. Basically, it consisted of all of the game's scenes and backgrounds placed side by side. This approach allowed us to compare the current style with any new artwork and make adjustments as appropriate to maintain a common style.

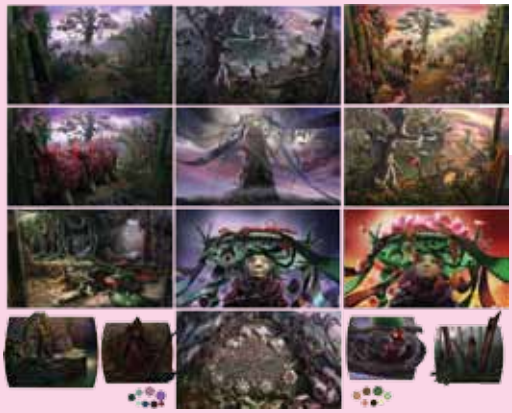


PORTAL
We decided to prove the concept of a dark fairytale from the earliest episodes. Thus, when users transfer via the well-known Portal into Nightmare Realm, they find themselves in prison and discover that this adventure is not going to be easy.

JUNKYARD OF FANTASIES
In order to create the right atmosphere for a grim fairytale, we relied on more than just colors and lighting. Therefore *Nightmare Realm* acquired the location we called Junkyard of Fantasies: an abandoned place full of stolen and used dreams of children. Such a location obviously couldn't look cheesy and flowery, so we conceived the place as lonesome and melancholy with some romantic flavors.

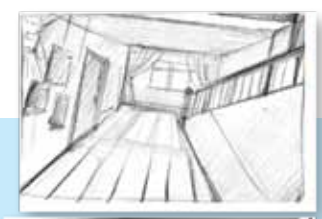
MOTHER NATURE
In both versions of *Nightmare Realm,* players travel between several rather different worlds. Starting the new project, every artist was given a challenge to suggest their own deeply detailed concept of the world. The idea of World of Mother Nature, who has to be saved during the course of the game, was entirely incarnated in the release version.

PALETTE
When we produced the sequel, we resorted to the good old palette method which so effective the first time around. When you compare the palettes of the two projects, the obvious difference is that the second one looks noticeably more shaded and obscured.



Nightmare Realm vs. *Nightmare Realm 2*

ART PRODUCTION



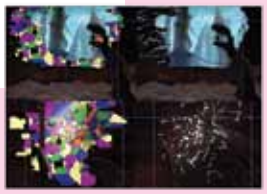
Sometimes in an effort to point out the emotion of events, we lost the sense of normalcy. The crash scene (and especially the rock's shape) clearly demonstrates this fact. But we consider there are too many ordinary things surrounding us, whereas every nuance of Nightmare Realm is supposed to show the player: Here is the alternative surrealistic world. And yes, we are still ready to sacrifice physical laws for the sake of our players; we want them to embrace the upcoming unreality.

Working in a small team, we didn't have enough time for technical experiments. Artwork was based on classical frame-structured sketches with further 2D or 3D overpainting.

Considering there were only two artists working on the project at the earliest stages, we could only afford key cut-scenes to be animated in detail. One of them is the dramatic episode of Emily's extraction—a key point that sets the whole story in motion.

We opened up a new level of 2D animation thanks to the talent of new members. Even though we still used matte painting, modern technologies allowed us to discover new vehicles for our ideas.

At times, *Nightmare Realm* becomes pretty grim, so players even have to deal with death. Since players start to sympathize with characters that are yet to die, we were careful not to overdo the emotions here: Players still needed to be scared and sad, but we definitely didn't want them to feel disgusted. Thus, when one character dies, he simply disappears from the habitat. Later on, players see a picture showing the moment when the villain pushes this character over a cliff so that everyone knows that he died. Another character ends up petrified—killed by the dark forces.



Nightmare Realm vs. *Nightmare Realm 2*

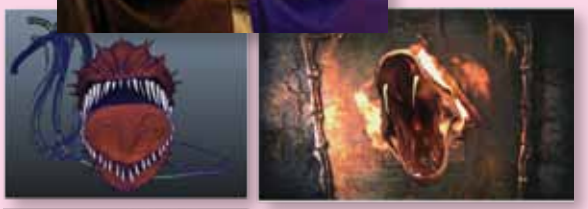
ART PRODUCTION

Initially we intended *Nightmare Realm* to have a little bit of a doll-like look, with purely drawn characters and exaggerated textures. However, we figured out that this approach would not be catchy enough for our potential audience. Ultimately we resorted to matte painting and photo outlining. Still, we tried to make silhouettes slightly weird and exotic.

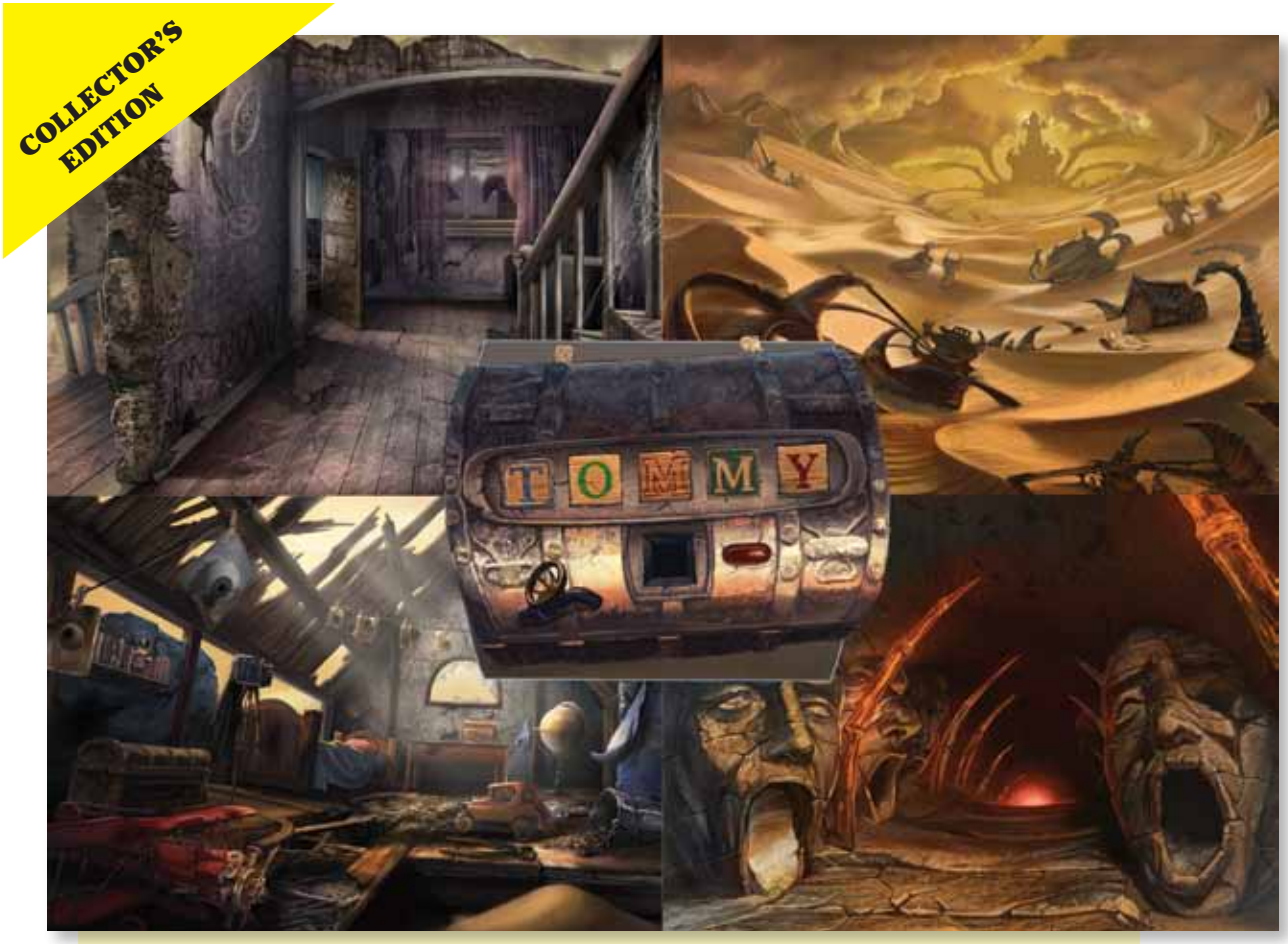
Once a month we demonstrated our work to colleagues from other departments within the studio to get an outside view of the project. Impartial opinion was not the only support they gave us. For instance, the concept of this robot was created by our programmer.

Initially we had to recreate the animation of characters frame by frame. In *Nightmare Realm 2*, we adopted new animation technology which allowed us to carry a character's model through the game. This technique made it quick and easy to express any emotion on the face of a character while still ensuring that the character was fully recognizable.

One of the main production breakthroughs was the massive involvement of videos. Some of our colleagues, including the studio's Financial Director, proved themselves as real actors. The technology has proved to be so amazing that we have been using it at full-scale for the development of our next game.



Nightmare Realm vs. *Nightmare Realm 2*



Bonus episodes, which were developed specially for the Collector's Edition, seem quite different from the main part of *Nightmare Realm* and its sequel.

We presumed that after playing four or five hours of the main episode, a player might wish to switch the current decorations, (even though they are quite beautiful) with inversed ones. So we typically create bonus episodes in a totally different style in order to catch a player's attention again at the end. Looking at the same event from another standpoint, players get essentially another game under the same cover. The difference is most noticeable in colors that preset the mood of the whole episode.

Considering the main episode happened to be a fairytale, we wanted to switch the emphasis into something extremely different. The bonus level was made as a psychological thriller within the main setting, where players are challenged to conquer not only enemies, but themselves.

In order to change the emphasis as much as possible, we thought big and substituted the main character with another one who seems to be a black horse in the main episode. This allows players to feel that the bonus episode is quite a different story while demystifying the character's motives (that happen to be unclear in the main episode).

The bonus episode succeeds in being a really different game. Initially, in fact, we wanted to make *Nightmare Realm 3* using this plot, so when we turned it into a bonus episode instead it was extremely concentrated and full of adventures.

HIDDEN OBJECTS

Most people playing casual adventure games like hidden-object game-play. Even so, they're becoming tired of the same old find-the-objects-on-the-list routine, so our team wanted to make HO-scenes more challenging. For this reason, we came up with some experimental features. This time it's not just a random list of objects players have to click—now they must deal with some ''keepers'' who prevent them from solving another storyline task. It's up to the player to figure out which object will help him to neutralize the ''keeper,'' which makes these scenes more challenging and strategic.

USER GUIDE

In addition to providing a diary with hints, tips, and guidelines, this time we offered a map as well. Ultimately we ended up with something similar to a board game in concept, with familiar mechanics and a system of chips, bonuses and cards that added to the fun.

Basically the plot of the bonus episode is built as a main game prequel from the time when Nightmare Realm was not so terrifying. Players are invited to enter what was once a flourishing, joyful universe and investigate the reasons it became so depressing.

We supposed players would be pleased to see familiar locations and characters in absolutely new perspectives. It was especially challenging to carry well-known characters into their youth or even childhood while keeping them recognizable. Ultimately the flashback's atmosphere brings a huge dose of fun.

Formerly Known as MoMinis

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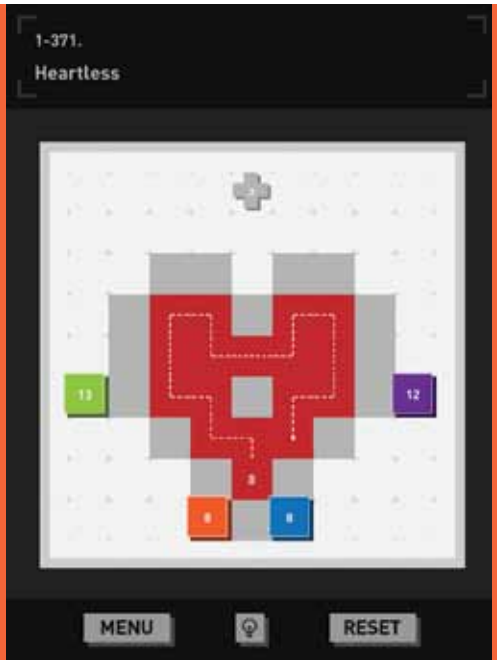

New Kid on the Blocks

How *HUEBRIX* Brought Originality to the Puzzle Genre

***HUEBRIX* is an original** puzzle game that challenges your visual, spatial and logical senses. You must fill an empty grid with colored paths that you can pull out of specific numbered blocks on the grid. The number on each block indicates the length of the path that can be dragged from it. There are other special blocks which provide clues as well as challenges in solving the 400 levels designed for this game.

HUEBRIX was launched on September 5, 2012, but it had been in production for over a year. Our team includes three people: I handle design, marketing, and business requirements; Krishna Israney is a designer, programmer, and artist; and Manu Thomas is our programmer. We don't have a full-time artist who can do elaborate character designs and animations, so we started off the development of *HUEBRIX* with a restriction: "Let's make a game with minimal dependence on art." Of the genres that came to mind, a casual puzzle game appealed to me because it was something I had wanted to make ever since I got into game-designing. Casual puzzlers may be simple to play, but a part of me knew they were really challenging to make—a challenge we thought we were up for.

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Our Escape from the Void

The Making of *Nihilumbra*

***Nihilumbra* is a philosophical** puzzle platformer with a deep storyline, a dark ambience and really innovative game-play. You play as Born, a strange being made of pure emptiness that one day escapes from the Void and starts wandering through the world. The Void, however, is not disposed to let him run away; it must be one, and it will track him relentlessly, destroying everything it finds on its path until it finds him.

This is the premise of *Nihilumbra,* a game where there's no evil to defeat, there's no quest to fulfill or destination to reach. You just have to fight for your right to be alive, and while doing it you will be responsible for the destruction of every place you visit in your journey.

How It All Started

BeautiFun games was created by a group of students. We all studied game development because we wanted to work in this industry, but

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HUEBRIX

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Developing the idea for *HUEBRIX* was a long journey. We started off with a game in which you would fold a pixelated/grid-based image which was drawn using multiple repetitions of a base shape. You were given a certain number of folds within which you had to arrive at the hidden base shape. This got us thinking along the lines of numbers and grids, but the concept required a lot of screen space to make larger, challenging levels—not really an option considering we were targeting iPhones and iPads. We researched a lot of puzzle games like *Osama's Riddle* and *3-Legged Aliens* and soon revamped our idea to form what was the earliest prototype of *HUEBRIX*. The game had a grid with numbered blocks you could use to drag paths of a fixed length, plus some colored blocks indicating the path passing through the particular block.

We conducted early play-tests on a number of our friends and family and quickly realized that there was a game here, but there was a lot of work to be done. People would just try to solve the puzzles locally first, working their way outward (clustering paths and folding them over themselves). This made the puzzles easier to solve than we had imagined. We needed to add special blocks that would restrict how the paths could be arranged on the grid.

Introducing Special Blocks

There were two things we could play around with for each path: the number on the block and the orientation of the path. Using this, we added the following blocks to the game:

- **HEAD BLOCK**
  The block that gives you the starting point on the grid
- **DEAD BLOCK**
  Does not allow any path to go through it
- **COLOR BLOCK**
  Indicates which path must go through that block
- **ARROW BLOCK**
  Indicates the outgoing direction of the path from that block
- **STOP BLOCK**
  Does not allow a path to exit from it (so it must be the last block of any path)
- **PLUS BLOCK**
  Adds a given number to your path's length
- **MINUS BLOCK**
  Subtracts a given number from your path's length
- **WRAP BLOCK**
  Though not really a block, sits on the edges of the grid and allow paths to wrap around edges and emerge from the opposite side of the grid.

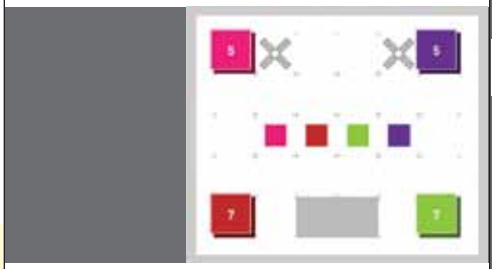
Once these blocks were in place we knew we had a game—but one in which level design would play an extremely crucial role.

Play-testing

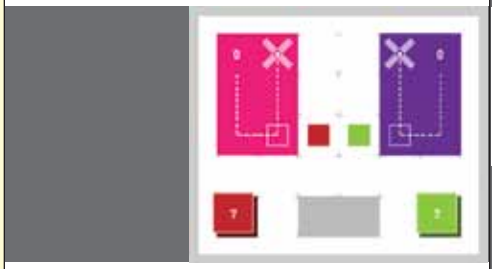
We created a sample level set and play-tested them out, capturing data such as the time taken to solve levels. Observing the play-testers, we got a lot of ideas of how to design the levels for this game. We saw that players solved levels like reading a book, top-down, left-right. They still preferred to fold paths. They would always gravitate to the COLOR blocks.

Play-testing led us to the following observations:

If players saw this:

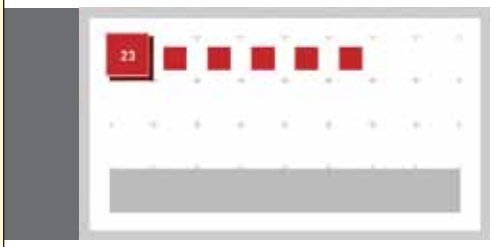


They would assume the solution to be this:

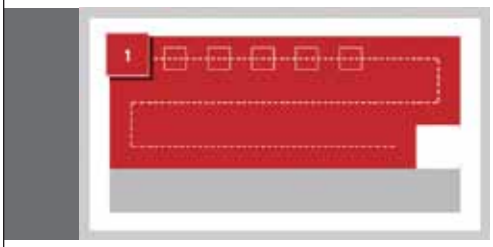


This observation led us to create what we called "logical misdirection." Similarly, players would be drawn to select the COLORED blocks first, so using these and ARROW blocks we could create what we called "visual misdirection."

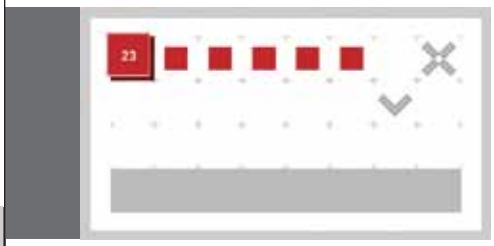
If players saw a level like this:



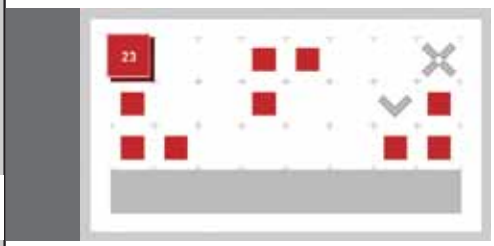
They would most likely solve it as shown below:



If we then changed the level in the following way, they may have had a hard time:



Unless we made this change:



Easy peasy! Again, if you see the level below, the popular instinct was to grab both the colored blocks together, but no solution actually allowed that:

by Shailesh Prabhu;
Founder, Yellow Monkey;
Mumbai, India

Difficulty Factors

Using what we saw, we identified and analyzed various factors for difficulty. Some of the most important ones were:

- Pure paths (those that don't touch themselves)
- Symmetry of the solution paths with one another
- Number of special blocks (DEAD, HEAD, etc.)
- Size of the level

Types of Levels

All of this data and insight gave us the ammunition we needed to design a variety of levels. Some of the types of levels were:

Unstructured These levels had no real visual logic, and they were usually hard to solve. We started off making levels like these but most of them were dropped from the game.

Fun These levels were easier levels made with certain shapes visible in the unsolved state.

Symmetry Even These levels had symmetrical solutions about any axis. Once you got some part of the solution, the rest was easy: involving only figuring out the symmetry.

Symmetry Odd These levels looked symmetrical, but the odd number of rows/columns made the solutions asymmetrical. They were fairly hard to solve.

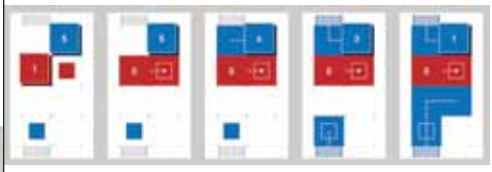
Fake Symmetry These levels misled you to think they were symmetrical. The +/- blocks threw the symmetry off and made such levels difficult to solve.

Misleading Clutter These levels had a lot of clutter of special blocks that made visualizing a solution difficult.

Sparse These levels had all blocks concentrated in small areas of the grid, leaving large white spaces which made it difficult to visualize a solution.

Helping Players Master the Game

HUEBRIX had original game-play, and if we wanted players to stick with it we needed to make sure they understood each of the blocks and new game-play elements we were introducing. To do that, we designed tutorial levels that would enforce the game-play of each new mechanic by making sure the player used that mechanic to solve that level. We followed these levels up with others that mixed and matched previous blocks but always reaffirmed the game-play of the new blocks.



Each of the difficulty factors we had identified affected the difficulty of a level in varying ways. Some factors would increase difficulty up to a point and then suddenly drop it. Some factors would increase difficulty depending on how other factors were behaving. The relationship was not linear and almost incomprehensible. The only way to be sure was through play-testing and averaging out the difficulty ratings of various play-testers (ratings calculated from their solution times and the level designer's difficulty estimates). Person A could look at a puzzle and solve it instantly while Person B got stuck on it for hours. But, on the very next puzzle, Person B could solve it in a minute and Person A got stuck forever. This was one challenge we had no way to overcome. The game still suffers from a sometimes-erratic difficulty curve.

Early Success

In conclusion, we were able to design an easy-to-learn, pick-up-and-play, original (and addictive) puzzle game. By the end of 2012, *HUEBRIX* had already achieved the following:

- iOS: 68,217 sales, 4/5 Stars (141 ratings)
- Google Play: 648,000+ downloads, 4.4/5 Stars (2131 ratings)
- Web: 187,000+ plays on Kongregate, 4.2/5 stars (8200 ratings); 207,000+ plays on Armor Games, 7.6/10 stars; 38,000+ plays on Newgrounds, 4/5 stars (1500 ratings)
- Metacritic Score of 76/100 ❊

Nihilumbra

continued from page 19

after finishing our studies we realized it was going to be nearly impossible to work at a company that made the kind of games we gamers loved.

And that was something really important for us. *The Creature,* a game I made while I was studying, had really good reviews, and we received lots of email from people around the world, telling us that the game was amazing and thanking us for doing it. I had to do more

games like that one. Original games with a lot of depth. Games designed for players.

There were other people thinking the same way, and we soon started considering the possibility of creating a company to start doing great indie games. Obviously, it was a tremendously difficult task. We could start designing

We changed the gravity of the game lots of times until we found that the jumps were accurate—slow enough to see where you were going to fall, but fast enough to look natural.

games in our houses during our free time, but we would have to do something else for a living. And there the story started getting surrealistic.

Aniol Alcaraz, one of the members of our team, confessed that he was a veteran poker player. He said he had enough money to rent an office, buy some PCs and start a business. We freaked out, and started working that day. For our first project, we chose to make a game for iOS because it's really easy to publish some-

thing on that platform. So we started working on the design of *Nihilumbra* before even deciding the name of the company.

Conceiving the Game

We wanted to create a great gaming experience for everyone who wanted to play games on an iPhone. That's all; that was our target. We didn't want to please everyone. Our goal was to make a game that no gamer with iOS would want to miss. With that in mind, we tried to imagine a game that combined old-school mechanics with some new features that used the touchscreen interface. We came up with the idea of changing the physics of the world by painting it with your fingers, and we combined it with a simple puzzle platformer scheme inspired by *Abe's Oddysee* and *Prince of Persia.*

For the atmosphere, mood and aesthetics of the game, we wanted to break with everything you can find on the Appstore. Usually you find shiny, colorful games that congratulate you with three stars every three minutes. We did just the opposite. We created a dark ambience with a terrible story about an inevitable fate and a lot of philosophical content. We wanted to deliver a deeper, more mature experience.

The Controls

At the same time, we wanted to keep the controls simple so everyone could play. We wanted to keep the painting mechanics really simple, without using a "painting mode": When you touch the screen, you paint. But that left us with an important problem: How will you move the character?

We all hated virtual buttons, but it seemed they were our only option. So we made a promise: We would find a way to make the controls easy and comfortable to use ourselves; otherwise, we would use a totally different control scheme.

To do so, I had to make some design decisions. The main character was originally supposed to be able to climb stairs or duck, which meant that he needed "up" and "down" buttons or a virtual joystick. By reducing the character

actions to three (move right, move left, and jump) we could limit controls to a small slidebar on one side and just one button on the other. With this configuration, controlling the character became really easy because the buttons were always under your thumbs: two fingers, two buttons.

We had to make other improvements as we perfected the controls. For example, we changed the gravity of the game repeatedly until we found that the jumps were accurate—slow enough to see where you were going to fall, but fast enough to look natural. We also realized that lots of people fell from a cliff when they tried to jump from the very edge—usually because they pressed the button too

by Kevin Cerdà; *Game Designer, BeautiFun Games;* **Sabadell, Spain**

late. So we made a little cheat—"the cliff trick." Now in *Nihilumbra,* if you fall from a cliff without jumping, you still have a fraction of a second to jump, even in mid-air. This small improvement proved to be really helpful in reducing player frustration.

But even with all this, we still found many people who said that they would never play a game with virtual buttons, so we ended up adding a secondary control scheme: tilting controls. We didn't believe they could really work, but there continue to be some people who prefer tilting over the virtual buttons.

Brown Goes Down

The development of the game went pretty well. It was harder and took longer than we expected, but we didn't have to make many changes to the original design. Actually, all of the enemies and colors of the game were defined the first week, and they remain the same today—with one important exception.

In our original design concept, if you painted the ground with brown, you would "erase"

it, which allowed you to dig tunnels. It was an interesting mechanic, and it allowed me to create some awesome puzzles, but we realized too late that it absolutely destroyed the rest of the game. Game-play became totally unpredictable unless we filled the game with non-paintable areas or limited the usable colors somehow. And both those solutions were totally contrary to the philosophy of the game. As a result, we had no choice but to change the brown mechanics. Now brown is a sticky color that allows you to climb on walls or trap enemies—radically different, but interesting enough.

Everybody Loves Born

We kept developing levels, building the storyline and improving the game, but in the middle of the development we discovered another problem. We realized people didn't care about Born, the main character, because they could only see him jumping around and solving puzzles. Nobody felt sympathy for him, and that was extremely serious considering we were trying to create a dramatic story based on his will to live.

We found two different solutions to this problem. The first step was to make him more human by creating new animations: sweating on hot levels, sneezing on cold levels, hurting himself when he falls from really high. With these enhancements people started saying: "Hey, look at him! Look what he's doing! He's so cute!"

The other step was to create a new shape for him at the beginning of the game—something cute and inoffensive reflecting the fact that he was created at that very moment. Since the game also shows a progression, an inner growth of the character, showing a baby shape in the beginning was something that really made sense. Not only that, it helped us make the beginning of the game more interesting, which is really important in an iOS game.

Setting a Challenge

In order to increase the replay-ability of the game, we came up with an unconventional solution. What if, after finishing the game, you could play it again from the beginning—but all the levels were different? We would be able to create new puzzles without creating new

art or more programming. What's more, we could make the game twice as long without doing twice the work. And it has turned out to be one of the best decisions we made.

We found a way to justify the challenge mode with storytelling. Once you arrive to the end of

Nihilumbra

the game, you discover that—for reasons I won't go into here—you must turn around and face the void a second time. It was an exciting concept—something really epic and definitely better than just an ordinary "hard mode." That's how the Void mode was born.

To add to the intrigue, we added one other requirement: You have to finish the whole game

and see the ending before being able to play the Void mode—which meant that we were free to make this mode totally cruel and hard. (Clearly it's not for everybody.) The difficulty curve in *Nihilumbra* is really smooth and progressive, but in Void mode it's as if there were a difficulty step followed by a difficulty roller coaster. In fact, we reflect the nature of this mode in the very first second. On the first level of the Void mode, you appear right next to a vicious monster and get killed before even realizing what's happening. That's where we blow your mind: You realize that the whole game to that point was nothing but a tutorial.

I'm totally happy with how this mode turned out. I was able to introduce some puzzles that were simply too hard for the main game, and players were rewarded with lots of hours of game-play. (This is something that I want to do, somehow, in all my future games.) In addition, there's another reward if you finish the Void mode. I won't tell what it is; I'll just say that there are a lot of people that have beaten the game three times.

So How Do We Sell It?

One of the most valuable things we learned through our experience with *Nihilumbra* is that if you make an original, special, strange game, you will have to find an original, special, strange way to sell it. Ordinary strategies just don't work. In fact, when we contacted some

publishers with an early alpha version of the game, the answer we received was: "Platformers don't sell on iOS."

After we finished the game, publishers were more interested in it. They saw the quality of the game, and lots of them tried to collaborate with us. But the fact is that most publishers use cross-promotion, in-game advertising or other strategies that work with a certain types of games but, even when they find *Nihilumbra* quite interesting, they just don't know how to sell it. They would ask: "Is it possible to turn *Nihilumbra* into a freemium game?" Or: "You guys do great games. If your next game is freemium please contact us."

Without any publishers, we needed to build our own marketing strategy. Otherwise our game would have been lost in oblivion. We sent out large numbers of emails to very important sites in order to generate reviews and some attention. Lots of websites showed interest in our game, and we received many great reviews. We were even featured in "New and Noteworthy" on the App Store, and we sold plenty of games in those first days.

Even so, sales started to drop. Our media coverage and the great reviews weren't enough to be truly successful. The fact is that most iOS users never go to video game sites to decide what they'll buy. They just open the App

Store and search for something interesting within the charts. We sold more just by being "New and Noteworthy" than when we got featured in Kotaku. But how do you get inside App Store charts without a large marketing budget? That's something that we still have to learn, but nowadays, our best advantage is the quality and originality of the game. We were featured by Apple as one of the best games of 2012 without sending a single email, and that's not the last step along the road.

The Future of *Nihilumbra*

The story of *Nihilumbra* doesn't end here. We are working on an awesome enhanced version for PC and Mac, with more content, a re-mastered soundtrack, and lots of new features. Some of the content we are developing right now will improve the smartphone versions as well, and in the future we will prepare a port to Android too.

At the same time, we have started the development of a new game. It's going to be something really different from *Nihilumbra.* We're determined to make it bigger and better, but in saying that, we realize we may be choosing either glory or death. It's going to be hard—it may, in fact, be suicide—but the video game world really needs people like us to push the limits. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't—the success is not guaranteed. But players don't forget games with soul, and treating them right pays off in the long term.

Or at least we hope so. ❊

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Studio Spotlight

Funtactix

COMPANY: Funtactix
FOUNDED: 2006
OFFICES: New York, Los Angeles, Tel Aviv
EMPLOYEES: 30
WEB: funtactix.com

FUNTACTIX

After the initial popularity of games designed for social network platforms, there was much criticism that these games were overly simplistic and failed to provide a genuine interactive experience. While there may remain some legitimacy to this perspective, it has been increasingly challenged by companies producing games that not only feature more sophisticated user interfaces, but more well-developed narratives as well. One company that is pushing forward the expectations for social network games is Funtactix. By developing new technology, partnering with established entertainment properties, and building a global presence, Funtactix is not only enhancing the social gaming experience, it is becoming a model for how a software company can thrive in the constantly changing gaming market.

Funtactix is not only enhancing the social gaming experience, it is becoming a model for how a software company can thrive in the constantly changing gaming market.

Funtactix was founded in 2006 by Yaron Leifenberg and Ilan Graicer. By 2008, Funtactix had formally entered the world of social network with the release of *Moondo,* a virtual world of online, multiplayer, 3D games. *Moondo,* one of the first to use full 3D games in browsers and the first to allow players to use the same avatar across multiple games, quickly gained over 150,000 active players. In that same year, Sam Glassenberg left his job as a Senior Lead Program Manager at Microsoft to become Funtactix's CEO. Although Graicer left the company the following year, Leifenberg stayed on as Chief Technology Officer (CTO).

Gone to the Movies

Funtactix shut down *Moondo* in 2009 to focus on using Flash and HTML5 platforms to create games based on popular intellectual properties. "We saw an opportunity to combine our technology with the reach of major properties," says Leifenberg, "and the shift paid off big-time." Even though *Moondo* was what Leifenberg calls "an incredible showcase," don't expect to see it coming back any time soon. "We love telling stories and we love movies," he says, "and we have too many exciting opportunities ahead of us to spend much time looking back."

Once the decision was made to pursue movie and other entertainment properties, Funtactix went all out. "We have poured years of effort and significant investment into building the only platform that is dedicated to transforming movies into games," says Leifenberg. "It isn't just our technology (which is a major component)—it's our game design approach, our art processes, our community and marketing strategy. We've built deep, trusted relationships with the filmmakers and the studios and have established an unmatched reputation in Hollywood. The soul of the company is movie-based games. It's what we are passionate about."

Since deciding to develop entertainment properties, Funtactix has released games based on the musicians, The New Boyz, and the popular franchises *Mission: Impossible* and *The Hunger Games.* And now that it has found success in Hollywood, the studio can afford to be incredibly selective about which properties it takes on. Says Leifenberg: "We choose movies that exist in an epic, story-rich universe filled with environments and characters. We choose films that have the potential to rally a massive, engaged fan-base."

Because they select movies with such dedicated fans, Leifenberg considers Funtactix's primary mission to be "achieving authenticity." Given how passionate fans can be, the firm knows that if any aspect of a game is *not* authentic, the fans will call them on it. To create that authenticity, Funtactix works di-

Yaron Leifenberg at Funtactix office

rectly with filmmakers to build the game rather than try to re-create the movie's story in a social game format, says Leifenberg, Funtactix works instead to create "something that is a part of the larger universe of the franchise. We are expanding it with new characters, story, and environments in the context of a game."

An example of this can be found in their game *Rango: The World. Rango* centers on a chameleon that unexpectedly becomes the sheriff of a town called Dirt. As Leifenberg observes, "The filmmakers had created a massive world with hundreds of characters, a small subset of which saw significant screen-time in the movie." *Rango: The World* offers players the chance to explore this world and further interact with many of the background characters.

In addition to creating an authentic experience, Funtactix also works to challenge what a typical social network game can be. "We are always looking for ways to push the limits of the medium," says Leifenberg. "Social game creators have shied away from adding deep narrative to their games for fear of limiting mass-market appeal. We've learned that the opposite is true. Social games are the ultimate storytelling platform. By adding character and narrative depth to our games, we've increased their appeal and success."

Opportunities and Challenges

While Funtactix quickly became successful making social games based on popular entertainment properties, each project has provided unique opportunities and challenges:

Rango

In the case of *Rango,* the screenwriter also wrote the story for the game. Funtactix worked directly with the production teams at Blind Wink and Paramount studios, with "full access to everything." However, a significant challenge was that *Rango* was a visual masterpiece with intricate detail in its computer animation. "To maintain this quality in a web-based game was a massive undertaking," says Leifenberg. "To put it in perspective, this was the first full-length feature animated entirely by Industrial Light and Magic. They had [roughly] 60 minutes or more to render a character frame. We need to generate 30 frames per second—in the browser!" To address this problem, Funtactix developed a new character system from the ground up so those making the game could better integrate Industrial Light and Magic's work into the game.

Funtactix

The New Boyz

The New Boyz was a rap duo that had a series of popular singles from 2009 to 2011. To help promote the duo's second album, Funtactix was selected to create a unique Facebook experience for fans. Funtactix did motion-capture for dance moves and created tie-ins with real-world album and music video premieres. Audience engagement and conversion on the fan page were extremely high—due in no small part to its ability to strengthen the emotional connection between fans and the duo.

Mission: Impossible

Before the fourth *Mission: Impossible* movie was released, the franchise had already generated over a billion dollars at the box office, developing a loyal fan base unaware of the original TV series. So to create a unique user experience that directly connected the Facebook game to *Mission: Impossible–Ghost Protocol,* Funtactix designed *Mission: Impossible–The Game* to reveal key locations and gadgets from the movie in the weeks preceding its box office opening. However, those at Funtactix did not want to just create an interactive marketing campaign; they wanted to tap into the life of a secret agent, complete with cool gadgets, exotic locales, and (in a twist only possible with social gaming) the chance to go on missions with a team of your friends. "The key was translating the core elements of the franchise into the medium," says Leifenberg. "The reason we were attracted to the property is that those core elements are great social game mechanics: collecting gadgets, exploring locations, PvP with double agents."

An important aspect of the *Mission: Impossible* stories is the nature of the assembled team. To replicate this element, the game allows you to select friends to be members of your team. As leader, you get to assign each team member a unique role on the mission (hack the security system, for example, or take down the guard). Team members then complete their assignments asynchronously, enabling you to take down the boss and complete the mission. "It's a very clean translation," says Leifenberg, "and the kind of thing we look for in all of our projects."

The Hunger Games

Even before *The Hunger Games* movie became a box office success, the book series was a global phenomenon, making *The Hunger Games Adventures* Funtactix's biggest project to date. The challenge facing Funtactix was to adapt the dark story of *The Hunger Games* to fit the social gamer's expectations of casual fun. Leifenberg and his team welcomed that challenge. "Suzanne Collins (the author) has created a world that extends far beyond the violence of the Games," he says. "There are [powerful] elements of social satire, redemption, friendship, heroism and selflessness. These elements translate beautifully to the social platform and have more appeal to the massive Hunger Games fanbase."

In addition to creating a game based on the story, Funtactix had the opportunity to use the game to add to *The Hunger Games* universe and fan experience. For instance, The Map of Panem was revealed inside *The Hunger Games Adventures.* According to Leifenberg, this is "the first time such a major element of a franchise's lore was released inside a video game."

Pushing the Boundaries

"Social games have been stigmatized as being stagnant from a game-design and storytelling perspective," says Leifenberg. "In large part, this is a fair criticism." The problem, as he sees it, is that "purely metrics-driven game design creates experiences devoid of friction and challenge. Players are almost as tired of playing these kinds of games as developers are of making them. As an industry we need to continue to innovate."

Funtactix takes seriously the challenge to keep innovating. Leifenberg pushes his team to raise the bar for graphics and animation excellence while never losing focus on "transforming social games into a mature storytelling medium that is worthy of epic franchises like *Mission: Impossible* and *The Hunger Games."* He adds: "Our technology was built from the ground up to enable our players enter the universe of the films they love. That means animated characters that come to life at high frame-rates, in worlds rendered in a wide range of visual styles across a spectrum of devices. That means high-definition content, motion-capture animations, gorgeous sprawling environments."

An example of the effort Funtactix puts into its games can be found in *The Hunger Games Adventures,* which was designed to work on Facebook and on iOS. While Funtactix had experience with developing Facebook games, the touchscreen on iOS devices required them to rethink the user-interface for the game.

"We were very thoughtful about how we wanted to bring the experience to mobile," says Leifenberg. "Touch allows for a much more intimate experience if you do it right. It's not just a matter of changing UI and porting it over. We've rebuilt the game completely for mobile while sharing content across the platforms—a process we continue to embrace as we expand to new devices. Maintaining multiple versions of the game that are updated as frequently as we do releases is certainly a challenge."

Building a Global Presence

While there is a perception that the modern gaming industry is rooted in North America and parts of Asia, Funtactix is one of the many companies highlighting Israel's growing presence in the global tech industry. According to Leifenberg, "Israel has an incredible track record for rapid technology innovation across a wide range of disciplines. The talent here is unmatched. Intel, Microsoft and Apple all opened their first development centers outside of

US in Israel. The major technology companies have a huge presence here." To emphasize his point, he cites a 2012 study by Startup Genome that names Tel Aviv "the second hottest place for start-ups in the world, right after Silicon Valley."

Leifenberg also acknowledges that Funtactix has greatly benefited from having offices in New York and Los Angeles. "By having locations in all these key cities," he says, "we have access to multiple talent pools across a range of disciplines." Additionally, "At any hour of the day, there is a team working on Funtactix titles. Having a studio in LA enables us to iterate closely with filmmakers, while taking advantage of Israeli engineering talent in Tel Aviv."

> Social games have been stigmatized as being stagnant from a game-design and storytelling perspective. In large part, this is a fair criticism.

Leifenberg claims Funtactix "is comprised of ninja engineers and artists that push platforms like Flash and mobile to their limits, bending these technologies to their will. And their will is to make award-winning games that the fans and filmmakers will love" Currently, those engineers and artists have several games in development that are in the non-disclosure phase of development. Besides those projects, *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* is set to be released November, 2013. Given that the second installment of *The Hunger Games* franchise is already predicted to be a box office success, it is likely Funtactix will be busy working with Lionsgate for some time to come. ❊

Exclusive Interview

My Epic Life Making Video Games

An Interview with **Warren Spector**

Interviewed by Nicholas Yanes

Warren Spector is the founder of Junction Point Studios and the designer of *Epic Mickey* and its sequels, *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two* and *Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion.* He earned a BS in Communications at Northwestern and an MA in Radio-TV-Film from the University of Texas in Austin. Spector became an editor at *Space Gamer* magazine in 1983. From there he became the editor-in-chief for all Steve Jackson Games (a company that produces role-playing, board, card games, and magazines), and he eventually began making role-playing games.

Spector entered the gaming industry when he started working for Origin Systems and Looking Glass Studios. By the late 1990s, Spector was so respected in the industry that he was asked to found Ion Storm's Austin branch. This branch went on to create *Deus Ex, Deus Ex: Invisible War,* and *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. Spector left Ion Storm in 2004 and in 2005 he founded Junction Point Studios, which would be acquired by Disney Interactive in 2007. As head of Junction Point, Spector has been the lead creator of the *Epic Mickey* franchise.

Q&A

NICHOLAS YANES: When did you realize you wanted to have a career in the entertainment industry? Were there any movies or stories that really inspired you to pursue a career in entertainment?

WARREN SPECTOR: I think I knew I was going to do something that involved storytelling when I was about three years old—seriously. I remember seeing the movie *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* when I was two (my first actual memory). Within the next few years I saw *King Kong* (the 1933 version), *Sleeping Beauty, The Shaggy Dog* and *The Absent-Minded Professor*—all vivid memories for me and life-changing events.

I went through my "I want to be an archaeologist" phase and my "I'm going to be a lawyer" phase, but I never could shake those dragons and magic rings and giant apes. Reading the *Tom Corbett, Space Cadet* books and "Heinlein juveniles" and Wylie and Balmer's *When Worlds Collide* sealed the deal for me. I was going to write or make movies, come hell or high water. Games didn't enter the picture until 1978 when, as a 22-year-old, I played *Dungeons & Dragons* for the first time. Game over. I was hooked!

NY: While at Steve Jackson Games, you developed some role-playing games. How has your background of developing RPGs, like *Toon*, influenced how you make video games?

WS: The funny thing is that I've had to *unlearn* as much as I learned from my tabletop game days!

Tabletop games can rely on the cleverness and creativity of a game master to direct and redirect an interactive story. Tabletop games all but require that players customize and personalize the rules to meet their needs (and to address inevitable game system bugs that creep into rulebooks). Electronic games can count on none of that—a PC or console game requires precision and completeness that are almost superhuman.

Let me give you a specific example: In my old tabletop days, I worked on a set of role-playing rules that some folks are probably still playing today. What they probably don't realize (or care about) is that, somewhere between my manuscript submission and the rulebook going to press, a critical combat table got left out! Amazingly, the game still works, with some players replacing the table with one of their own and the rest not caring. Imagine that in an electronic game! You can't. A "bug" that egregious would stop the game from running.

THE GULCH: Disney and Oswald flying to the Gulch, an area of the Wasteland equivalent to the Frontierland areas in Disney's theme parks.

Warren Spector

Here's another example: I remember playing *D&D* one day (well, many days!), when the Dungeon Master intended us to fight our way through a deadly, dangerous dungeon, but my friends and I said, "Nah, we don't wanna do that today." And the DM was forced to—was *able* to—re-think his interactive story on the fly to accommodate us. That doesn't happen in electronic games.

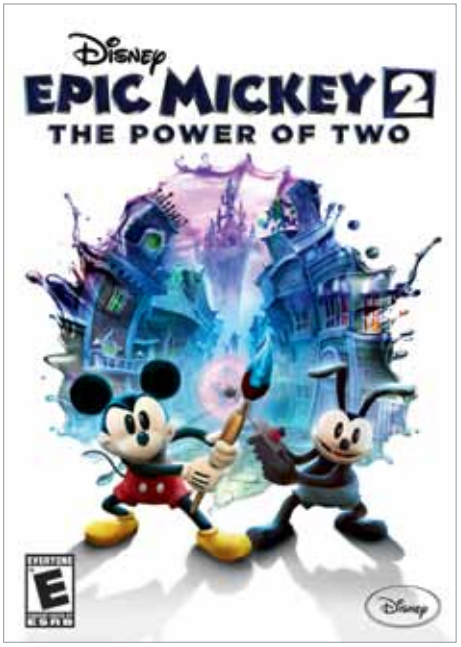
Now, to get around to answering your question—finally: For all the lessons I've learned about how different video games are from tabletop games, I've spent my entire professional life trying to bring some of that tabletop open-endedness and player-driven-ness to video games. Every time you hear me ranting about how "play-style matters" or "choice and consequence" or "empowering players to tell their own story," it's all code for "Bring back that good old *D&D* feeling!"

NY: Neither one of your degrees is in programming or digital graphics. Do you feel that the video game industry is still open to those who lack formal computer training? On this note, what do you think non-computer sciences majors bring to videogame development?

WS: First, I do feel the lack of programming and art skills every once in a while. But the lack of those skills has forced me to come at games and game development from a different angle—a good thing, overall, I think. And it has forced me to surround myself with like-minded people who share my interests and beliefs about what games can and should be but who are far better than I am at just about everything associated with the nuts and bolts of software development (That's a great thing, no matter *what* your background and training might be. Always work with people better than you are!) Do I think there's still room for someone without a CS background in games? Sure. It ups the difficulty level, for sure, career-wise, so I don't recommend it; but it's possible.

With all the focus on the mainstreaming of games and story in games and such, people from the mainstream, people with story and writing backgrounds or cinematics experience are useful. But don't come into this thinking, *I'm a writer and I'm going to tell these guys how to tell a story, or I'm a movie director so I'll teach them about cinematics.* You *have* to be willing to acquire some knowledge of software development, of programming, of the technical aspects of your craft. We *do* make software and, whether you're a designer or artist or audio person (or, obviously, a programmer), being able to talk to people in other disciplines, to understand their contributions and the limitations of what's possible, is crucial. Non-CS folks can bring freshness and new perspectives, but understand that anything and everything you do in game development has a technical element. So make sure you pick up some programming skills before you apply for a job!

NY: Practically every aspect of the video game industry has changed since you first entered. Which of those changes do you believe have had the biggest impact?



Warren Spector

FORT WASTELAND AND A SLOBBER: Set in the new area, Fort Wasteland, this image shows Mickey battling a Slobber. Slobbers are powerful enemies that typically appear to stop Mickey from accomplishing a task.

ELLIOT: This was a Wasteland parade float based on Elliot the dragon from the 1977 movie, *Pete's Dragon*. Now turned evil by the main villain in *Epic Mickey 2,* Elliott allows players to choose whether to defeat him or redeem him.

THE RAINBOW CAVERNS: Rainbow Caverns is a new location in *Epic Mickey 2* that is divided into two sections: the Devil and Angel Caverns. It is based on the Mine Train through Nature's Wonderland, a Disneyland attraction that existed from 1960 to 1979.

WS: Obviously, our graphical and audio capabilities are leaps-and-bounds beyond what they were when I started. I mean, I remember being excited about having 16 colors to play with. And I'll never forget the awe we all felt upon hearing what an Ad Lib or early Sound Blaster card could do—way better than the beeps and boops we were all used to before they came along! I remember thinking, *We'll never fill up a CD* with game assets! (How naïve I was!) And I was lucky enough to work with a crack team at Blue Sky (later Looking Glass) on the world's first fully-texture-mapped, real-time 3D game—*Ultima Underworld*—a game that helped move us from 2D to 3D in a serious way.

The change I have the most difficulty dealing with is just the size of development teams. When I started in games it was one person, a keyboard and a screen. When I started in computer games, a big team was a dozen people. Today, it isn't unusual to have hundreds of people on a single project. Wrangling that many people is a real challenge.

The other big change, related to the first, is how much higher the stakes are today. When you spend tens of millions of dollars on a game, you have to sell a lot of copies just to break even. Talk about stress! And there's no doubt that doing innovative things, risky things, is harder now than it was back in what you might call the frontier days of game development.

Of course, all of what I've said—about costs and team sizes and all—is true only of the triple-A console game space. The biggest of big changes in games recently has been the explosion of new business models and distribution methods. Nowadays, you can make a game by yourself, exactly as you want to make it, and reach an audience with that game. The tools are there to create your game and the channels are there to sell it or give it away. You can charge for it, go free-to-play, or ask for subscription fees. You can play on phones, in web browsers, on dedicated consoles. Anything's possible, and that's a pretty exciting development, whether you're a game-maker or a game-player.

NY: What were some of the business challenges you encountered when creating your own studio? Additionally, given your belief that "play-style matters," were you hoping that Junction Point would approach game development in a fundamentally unique way?

WS: Heh! What business challenges did we *not* encounter when we started Junction Point? My partner at that time, Art Min, and I didn't want to go the traditional publishing route, and we didn't want to go after angel investors or anything like that, so we spent months working with some other developers and some folks at the Creative Artists Agency to pull together some alternate financing schemes—more movie-like funding models. It almost worked, but ultimately didn't. That kind of left us scrambling! It all worked out, though—we got to work on some cool concepts as an independent before becoming part of Disney to make the first *Disney Epic Mickey* game.

As far as the "Play-style matters" stuff goes, I didn't *hope* it would allow us to approach development in a unique way—I *knew* it would. I insisted on it. As a gamer, my tastes are pretty eclectic—I like a puzzle game as much as the next gamer, and I'll play cinematic games like anyone else. But as a developer, as someone who believes games are art, I'm not at all interested in making traditional shooters or puzzle games or in making games more like movies. Let other people do that. Junction Point was always going to be about letting players overcome challenges in games the way they want to and then deal with the consequences of their choices. And that does require thinking about development differently.

NY: *Epic Mickey* is not only a financially successful game, it is also a game that fans have a genuine affection for. Why do you think players have such a powerful connection to this franchise?

WS: If I knew, for sure, why players responded so well to *Disney Epic Mickey,* I'd bottle it and set myself up for life! I don't know. I guess it was that we offered some unique gameplay—a different tone and deeper story than people are used to in platform and adventure games.

I know we were respectful of our subject matter, and I think fans can always tell when

RAINBOW FALLS: Rainbow Falls is one of the many new areas to explore in *Epic Mickey 2*. In addition to featuring Mickey and Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, this image shows how *Epic Mickey* pays homage to other Disney characters.

the people who make a game (or a movie or a TV show or a novelization) love the thing they're working on as much as fans do. We embraced our inner Disney geeks and tried to do in a game what Walt and his company did in films and at theme parks—tell a great, emotional story and respect the audience's intelligence. But really, who knows why people responded so well? I'm just glad they did!

NY: In the process of developing *Epic Mickey*, you were able to visit the archives. What was one of the coolest things you learned from this experience? Also, after helping bring Oswald the Lucky Rabbit back into the mainstream, are there any other old Disney characters or concepts that you'd love to see dusted off?

WS: There were so many cool things, it's hard to single one or two out. I guess seeing the storyboards for the *Gremlins* movie would be near the top of the list. Roald Dahl and Walt Disney working together on a WW2 cartoon about destructive little imps? How cool is that? Really though, the coolest thing about the Archives wasn't any one thing, it was just the fact that there were so *many* things to explore and investigate—and new things being discovered in dusty old boxes all the time. Getting a glimpse into Disney's creative process was just amazing. The fact that the company has preserved all of that stuff is mind-blowing.

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Warren Spector

Junction Point was always going to be about letting players overcome challenges in games the way they want to and then deal with the consequences of their choices. And that does require thinking about development differently.

Are there other characters and concepts to dust off? Of course! If nothing else, it'd be awesome to work with all the rejected Tinkerbells created by Disney artists when they were working on Peter Pan!

NY: You are working with Peter David on an *Epic Mickey* graphic novel, and you worked with comics legend Marv Wolfman on *Epic Mickey 2.* What are some ways that you think understanding comic book storytelling might help with video game development?

WS: It was great working with Peter and Marv. They're both terrific writers and storytellers, and they both love Disney, something I didn't know before we started working together. Honestly, though, comic book storytelling is so different from videogame storytelling, I honestly can't point to any specific lessons learned. I found that out the hard way last year when I wrote four issues of the *Duck Tales* comic book for Boom! Studios—man that was tough! Fun, but tough. I was really surprised by how different it was, writing for comics, compared with games or novels. It's a completely different media.

NY: On a scale of one to 10, how awesome is Marv Wolfman's last name?

WS: Eleven! Of course, "Spector" is pretty cool, too. Many's the time I've marveled (pardon the comic book company pun) about Wolfman and Spector working together. We could be a superhero/supermonster team! Then again, I'm easily amused.

NY: With *Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two* and *Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion* recently released, how do you think these two games benefited from lessons learned while making *Epic Mickey?*

WS: You learn from every game you work on, obviously. On the first *Disney Epic Mickey* game, we learned a ton about third-person camera systems which we applied on *DEM2.* And we learned that Disney fans really want to hear their characters talk! We gave everyone a voice in *DEM2.* We also learned a lot about working with Disney—it's a big company, with lots of approvals and stuff you have to get when you're working with Mickey Mouse and characters like that. I think we did a better job of managing that the second time around.

NY: Finally, when you think about the future of gaming, what are some of the technological and business changes you'd like to see take place?

WS: Hard question. I don't *know* what I want in the way of tech or biz changes. I'm not the techiest guy, so I can't say I'm sitting here salivating over the ability to throw more polygons on a screen or anything like that. I think most of our big challenges are more creative than technical: We have to choose to address things like dynamic worlds and non-combat AI and all.

As far as the business goes, it's great that we have so many different approaches to making money on games—retail sales, digital download, free-to-play, subscription, microtransactions, etc. But man, it'd be nice if things would just settle down. Right now, it seems hard to make money no matter what you do—big projects, big teams and big budgets make the traditional business challenging. Mobile and social games, with expectations of low-cost (or *no*-cost) play offer their own challenges. Yeah, it'd be nice if things would just settle down and we could all just get back to the work of making great games without having to worry about stuff like monetization and all! ❊

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Raising the Bar of Casual Game Development

Using 3D Technology to Create a Competitive Edge

Over the last few years, the casual gaming market has exploded, with games and apps rapidly populating the marketplace. With so many choices, the industry is quickly becoming saturated, and yet many industry observers anticipate continued growth in the next few years. In 2010, mobile/online games revenue represented 39 percent of global games revenue from end-user expenditure ($22B USD), and analysts forecast that this number will reach $41B USD by 2015 (Digi-Capital Global Games Investment Report 2012). As this market share grows, so do competition, development costs and production complexity.

Now 3D animation technology is helping artists and studios bring new life to 3D and 2D games across all platforms while accelerating development—without sacrificing the narrative, asset creation, asset sharing, or player interaction.

At the same time, 3D animation is playing an increasingly important role in bringing the gaming experience to the next level and in meeting the increasing expectations of the mid-core gamer. Until recently, advanced 3D animation software and art tools were used to create complex, graphically heavy games for play on dedicated devices such as consoles, PCs, and portable handhelds. However, we are beginning to see a rise in studios using these tools to design games with a much smaller scope. Now 3D animation technology is helping artists and studios bring new life to 3D and 2D games across all platforms while accelerating development—without sacrificing the narrative, asset creation, asset sharing, or player interaction.

The Evolution of 3D Technology

As casual gamer expectations rise, technology developers are making notable investments to broaden their offerings and give the industry access to the tools it needs to create higher-quality games in both 2D and 3D environments. Collaboration among key players across all segments of the industry (AAA, Mobile, PC, etc.) has contributed to the development of such technology. It has allowed technology developers to better understand common production challenges and to create the tools to help solve them.

Casual game developers are also starting to take advantage of powerful toolsets traditionally used in console game development to bring engrossing casual games to market faster and more efficiently. The casual market moves quickly, so developers don't have the luxury of long development cycles. Casual game studios are typically more flexible in their exploration of potentially helpful innovations. Any technology that can accelerate development is a huge boon.

Zynga is a prime example of a developer in the social and casual market that has embraced 3D technology to design games that meet the expectations of a more demanding audience. It recently tapped 3D animation tools to create 3D crops, animals and environments for *FarmVille 2,* which breathed new

by Wesley Adams; *Industry Marketing Specialist, Autodesk;* **Montreal, Canada**

life into the *FarmVille* franchise and raised the standard for the social gaming experience. A new 3D workflow allowed their animation team to leverage existing assets from previous games in the development of *FarmVille 2,* decreasing the amount of time it took overall to build the interactive experience.

New technological advancements in hardware capabilities and connectivity will continue to raise gamer expectations, and competition will grow in the marketplace as the casual games market further evolves. Developers are beginning to see the value of embracing 3D workflows to produce games that can rise above the noise.

More Powerful Technology

Meanwhile, with each generation mobile devices are becoming more powerful, with enhanced graphical power removing common performance barriers such as processing speeds and memory capabilities. This robust technology has expanded the casual experience to allow for 3D games with visually complex graphics and game-play across iOS, Android, Windows 8 and more. Additionally, increased bandwidth and wireless connectivity (3G/4G/LTE) have enabled an online gaming experience similar to a hardwired home console multiplayer game.

On top of improved device capabilities and connectivity, game engine developers have also started adding support for new platforms and web technologies to enable continuous game-play across multiple platforms. *Call of Duty: Black Ops II,* for example, launched with an iOS app that allows gamers to track and analyze game-play statistics from an iPad. Other developers are leveraging these improvements to create cross-platform games that can be started on one device, paused, and then continued on another. According to a report from NewZoo, 22 percent of American mobile gamers used mobile games as an extension of a game played on a different platform in 2011. These advances push developers to build gaming experiences for the right platform without compromising features.

Each new technological development raises the content creation bar for casual developers. Whether in 2D or 3D, casual gamers have come to expect a higher visual quality,

SUCCESS IN 3D DEVELOPMENT

FARMVILLE 2

The Zynga team heard increasing feedback from players asking for their game boards to feel more alive. A 3D workflow was the next logical step, saving time while allowing the team to create a living, breathing world.

WIZARD OPS CHAPTER 1

Indie game development studio Phyken Media relied on 3D tools to develop this studio debut arcade shooter. The title was released in December 2011 and updated through late 2012. To create authentic game-play, Phyken used Maya to create flexible 3D models and lighting and to complete complex rigs and animation that brought additional depth and detail to the game's characters and environments. After all of the assets were finalized, the team easily exported them to the Unity engine.

FIELDRUNNERS 2

When Subatomic studios began work on the sequel to its popular award-winning tower defense game, *Fieldrunners,* they leveraged 3D tools to design stand-out graphics and fluid animations. Developing the assets in 3D allowed the Subatomic team to enhance the game-play in *Fieldrunners 2* with a new approach to maze-building.

Images courtesy of Subatomic Studios.

similar to what they experience on consoles, PCs, and gaming-dedicated handheld devices. For a long time, the industry was chasing the idea of putting console-quality games in the pockets of gamers, and the industry is one step closer. The propagation of mobile devices is creating a massive market—larger than any we've seen before.

Creating animations in a 3D environment is more cost-effective, because one model can be used to create many animations, and animations can be more easily re-used across similar models within a 3D tool.

Adoption of 3D Workflows

There's no question that the number of mobile gamers is on the rise. A recent report from NewZoo revealed that the number of mobile gamers jumped 35 percent in the U.S in 2011. It also found that 4.2 million iOS games are downloaded per day in the U.S. and 2.4 million in key EU territories. An increasing number of developers of all sizes are entering the casual games market to take advantage of this boom.

More AAA developers are investing resources to build casual games or ancillary apps to accompany console games—bringing new skills to the casual development process. Major game studios with hardcore game IP are now also creating custom IP for use on mobile devices, including such titles as *Infinity Blade, N.O.V.A.* and *Fibble.* Additionally, former AAA developers are opening new studios devoted solely to casual development. Companies like Autodesk are offering familiar tools to these developers that also meet the specific needs of casual development. For example, Autodesk Scaleform for Mobile Platforms leverages similar design principles used to create Scaleform middleware—a tool that has been used to create menus and UIs for 1,000 AAA games worldwide.

As these players enter the casual games market, they bring experience using 3D art creation tools and animation software. Consequently, casual developers now have a larger talent pool to draw from, which in turn can help them reduce the studio-level learning curve—while also enhancing the quality of their games.

The 3D Art Creation Process

Using production-proven 3D animation technology to create a 3D mobile game helps casual developers to produce greater graphical differentiation—which appeals to consumers who are familiar with similar content styles from console games or animated films. Studios can also save a lot of time by leveraging existing engine-integration technologies that can simplify the art-to-engine pipeline and interoperability between a studio's art creation tools and its game engine.

At the same time, 2D game developers looking for a more efficient method to create high-quality 2D or 2.5D games can also benefit from the use of 3D animation technology. For instance, 3D models and animations can be captured as a series of 2D images that can be combined to make it look as though the character is animated in 2D.

There are several benefits to working this way. Creating animations in a 3D environment is more cost-effective, because one model can be used to create many animations, and animations can be more easily re-used across similar models within a 3D tool. Additionally, tweaking model surface details only requires texture modification when done in a 3D tool. In contrast, to do this for 2D images you might end up having to re-draw an entire character, which can be a huge drain on time and resources. Finally, animations can be batched together much more easily to create more complex character or environment interactions that can engage gamers by creating a world that flows together much more naturally than with other methods.

A number of casual developers have already started to embrace 3D workflows and are turning to 3D technology software to create their games, including *Fieldrunners 2* from Subatomic Studios, or Phyken Media's arcade shooter game *Wizard Ops Chapter 1.* Other early adopters include *Funpark Friends* by Tag Games and *Band Together*—a casual puzzle solver game from Red Engine Productions that reached a 4.5 star rating in iOS store with more than 1,000 reviews.

What's Next for 3D Animation

There is great potential power in using 3D technology to develop games for the mobile and social platforms. It can not only speed up the development process, but also enhance the quality of a game—which is essential in such a crowded marketplace. The use of 3D technology advances the evolution of graphics and game-play to offer players a new way to interact with their favorite game universes. The adoption of 3D technology will continue to increase, with 3D workflows becoming more mainstream among casual game developers. ❊

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It Takes a Village

Keys to Making *Village Life* a Social Success

It's November 2012. *Village Life*, our newest virtual-world social game has been "in the wild" for just three weeks. We're not pushing it heavily just yet (we need a little time to tune the balance of the game), but the metrics are looking very healthy so far. Virality is strong, retention is stellar and monetization is looking very promising, so much so that it's already performing at a higher level than our other virtual world titles *Gourmet Ranch* and *Kingdom Quest.* So why are the metrics looking so good? To understand that, I should explain how *Village Life* came to life.

The Start of the Journey

Back in the summer of 2011, I was tasked with drawing up a concept for the follow-up title to *Gourmet Ranch.* I brought some initial ideas to a brainstorm with Playdemic's CEO Paul Gouge in which we threw around the many different genres and high-level concepts. High on the list of priorities was making a game that would retain players well: We learned long ago that the bedrock of growth is retention—specifically, day-one retention (the percent of players who come back to your game on the day after they install it). You can create the most viral game on Facebook, but if it doesn't retain well, it will never maintain a stable user-base and thus never significantly grow. We decided that to get a game that retained well, our aim should be to create something that would compel players to stick with us through the First-Time User Experience (FTUE); and then encourage them to come back the next day.

Gourmet Ranch—our first Facebook title—retained players pretty well when it was first launched, but several months later it hit a ceiling of around 350,000 DAU. We discovered that its base retention was one of the reasons we couldn't grow it more than that. If we wanted the new game to have a higher DAU it would have to retain players far better.

It's a People Thing

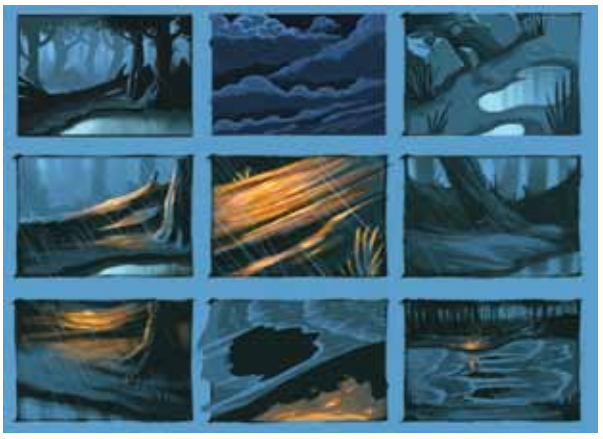
We also knew the game theme was going to be critical to improving the games' retention. Since there's only so much love you can have for a potato, we decided to make the game about something that the player would care about much more: people.

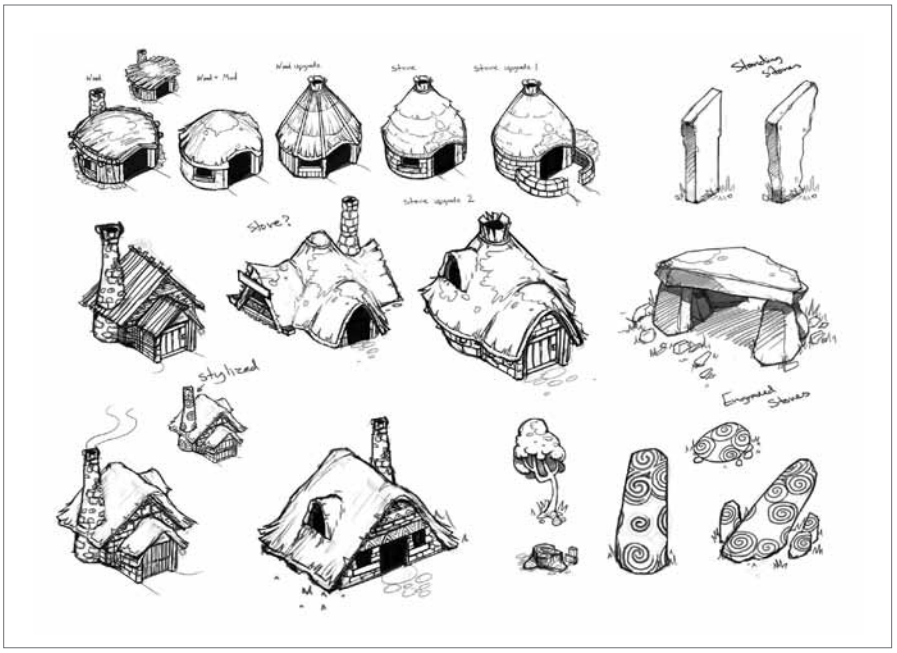
The game I envisaged tasked the player with providing the basic needs of shelter and sustenance for a group of villagers. After that, players would be required to cater for the villagers' more advanced needs, such as relationships and a more meaningful existence. If players provided the basic needs first, they would see feedback from the villagers themselves, who would visibly change mood and start to enjoy themselves by interacting with objects the players provided. In many ways this made the game akin to an advanced Tamagotchi, with people in place of creatures.

Does a Good Theme Lead to Retention?

We had a strong theme, compelling click loops and a meta game of advancement and progression that all hung together well at a high level. What we needed next was a way to weave these together into an initial game-play session that was engaging enough to bring players back—so we decided to look at how other successful games had managed to get this right.

by Alex Rigby; *Chief Creative Officer & Co-founder, Playdemic;* **Wilmslow, Cheshire, UK**



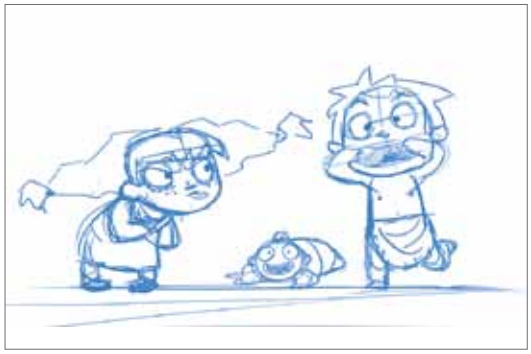


Lionhead's *Black & White* game from 2001 was another game about people in a primitive setting. We dug out a video of the intro to *Black & White,* which saw a couple of primitive islanders and their son happily strolling along a beach. Suddenly, their son finds himself in the sea being circled by a shark, instantly shifting the mood to one of high tension. Just when all is looking lost, a ghostly hand forms in the air above the boy and plucks him out of the sea, delivering him safely into the arms of his parents on the beach. The whole sequence only lasts a couple of minutes, but it grabs your attention and makes you actually care about the characters from the start.

When we thought about retention, this sequence formed some of the inspiration for the intro to *Village Life.* We liked the idea of players being thrust into a situation where they have the power to help vulnerable people (or not). We set about forming the context of this scenario, making it tug on as many heartstrings as possible. We loved the idea of a couple, but instead of them already having children, we made the woman heavily pregnant, just minutes away from giving birth. Our design for the intro portrayed the villagers fleeing from a disaster; a flood has washed their village away, and they are lost in a forest during a fierce storm. They have no shelter, food or water, and it's up to the player to provide these before the moment of birth.

So far, it seems to be working. The FTUE completion for *Village Life* is the best we've ever achieved. Add to that the ability for the player to name the babies (every player has twins) directly after they are born, and very early on we encourage strong bonds between the player and the game. We've noticed that most players seem to name the babies after their own kids or other real family members—which we hope makes this bond even stronger.

We decided that to get a game that retained well, our aim should be to create something that would compel players to stick with us through the First-Time User Experience and then encourage them to come back the next day.



The effort we put into the starting sequence resulted in a compelling, rich and narrative-based gaming experience which buys us that very precious commodity: time with our players—time we can use to teach them the basics, create bonds between them and the virtual world, and time to charm and romance them into coming back the next day.

Feeling Real

Many social games can feel one-dimensional. We wanted to make sure that when people stepped into *Village Life* they had the feeling that the game had a life of its own, that villagers were going about their business and the player just happened to be watching at that particular moment. Some villagers will be working on a task set by the player in a previous session, others will be playing games or using objects, discussing their needs, or just having a drink at the water station.

To make the game seem more "real" we also developed a time-of-day system in *Village Life* so that days and nights pass with distinct changes to the lighting and ambience of the game. Fires and lanterns cast a warm glow in the evenings and the weather can change between sunshine, rain or snow. But perhaps the most important feature in *Village Life* is the fact that the villagers visibly age over time. On the very first day of play, you see the birth of baby twins. Come back a day later and those newborns will now be toddling around the landscape. A week later and they will be aged seven and playing with the toys that you provide. A few days more and players will begin to notice the adults in their village starting to turn a little grey around the temples. Aging in *Village Life* is probably the most profound way to create the feeling of time passing in the game.

Social Games Aren't Social

"Social features" in Facebook games usually equate to clever techniques the game employs to be viral and retain its user-base—principally by using players as social advocates. Gifting, buildables and staffing are the bread-and-butter, whilst volume is the name of the game. Some games get poor reputations by doing too much of this, but the truth is that these techniques are essential if you want your game to grow a solid user-base, particularly in the new age of Facebook gaming where rampant virality has been throttled back. Players are fickle beasts and will love a game one day and forget it the next, so you have to use all the ammunition at your disposal to remind them to come back. Having said that, we feel many of these techniques are spam in the eyes of the players, and aren't always coherent to the game-play. In *Village Life,* we strived to bring much more meaning

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into the social mechanics, which we hoped would make them more effective.

Because the villagers age and eventually die, our players need to make sure that new villagers are born. Childbirth can only happen between two villagers who are married, and villagers are not allowed to marry into their own village. So, once a villager reaches 18, they develop a very important need for something that the player must try to provide: love.

To find love, players can send out dating requests to any of their friends who have a similarly love-starved youth in their village. If they don't have any friends playing the game yet, they are prompted to invite them (helping to spread the virality). If they manage to get a date and it goes well, the couple will soon get married and choose to go and live in one of the villages. With luck, in a few days' time, they'll become happy expectant parents, ready to bring the next generation of villagers into the world.

This isn't just a gimmick: This is social interaction with purpose and meaning. It opens up a host of ways to strengthen relationships between players, allowing us to retain players far more easily. After all, who wouldn't want a message letting them know their grandchild has just been born and they should come and see her? The engagement levels we are already seeing, thanks to the relationship side of *Village Life,* are already far higher than we would normally get from gifting and other more basic forms of virality and retention.

So Where Do We Go from Here?

At Playdemic we designed, developed and implemented our own tailor-made analytics system which is openly available to every member of the company, dotted on screens around the office. These allow us to track every aspect of our games at a highly granular level, and we have a dedicated team who analyze this data to see what is and isn't working. By conducting funnel analysis, we can understand where players drop off, allowing us to make changes to optimize their completion rate. All of this means we are constantly evolving our games to continuously improve and fine-tune each one to maximize the game-play, user experience, player retention, monetization, etc. This kind of iterative process is essential to making sure the game lives up to its full potential.

We wanted to make sure that when people stepped into *Village Life* they had the feeling that the game had a life of its own, that villagers were going about their business and the player just happened to be watching at that particular moment.

The future for *Village Life* is incredibly exciting. We have created a gaming experience that has the potential to go far beyond what we've achieved in the space so far. We can now bring to bear the full extent of our experience in running live games, releasing content updates regularly and making sure that our players are kept engaged and thrilled by their own journey through the *Village Life* universe. Very little of this potential, if any, would have been possible without our obsessive approach to certain critical growth metrics. Day-one retention is not just a statistic; it's a numerical description of how engaging your customers think your product is and a barometer of its future growth. Ignore it at your peril. ❊

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Old-fashioned Values

DotEmu Takes on the Retro-gaming Market

Ask any fan of science fiction, fantasy, or sports about their passion and you'll find that they nearly always wax poetic about how their fandom came alive in their youth. No wonder, then, that marketers work so hard to tap into that sense of nostalgia. Pepsi recently introduced a throwback variation of its regular soft drink; NBA teams often sell throwback apparel and other memorabilia to appeal to fond memories of decades gone by; and more recently, Disney released *Wreck-It Ralph,* a film that includes many classic video game characters (which no doubt helped it attract much of its older male audience).

Gamers are no exception to nostalgia's influence. With many gamers still in love with their first console system and many avidly collecting games from their youth, it should come as no surprise that retrogamers are a sizable audience. One company that has successful profited from this niche audience is DotEmu.

New Classics:
A Vampyre Story

Founding DotEmu

Xavier Liard and Romain Tisserand grew up playing Amstrad CPC, Amiga, Super Famicom (also known as the Super NES in North America). For Xavier, these early gaming systems contained a "magic" that is rarely found in modern releases. Romain not only felt connected to the games of his youth, he thought there was business potential in developing a system that allowed people to continue legally enjoying these games. So, in 2000 he started working on DotEmu as a personal project. Xavier joined Romain on this project in 2006, and within a year they had DotEmu up and running.

Shortly after DotEmu was founded in 2006, Nintendo Wii launched Virtual Console, the Wii shopping channel that allows people to buy old Nintendo games for use on the Wii. Instead of seeing the Virtual Console as the end of their company, Xavier and Romain saw it as a confirmation of what they were doing. They knew if Nintendo was investing a sizeable amount of money to provide consumers with older console games, there was clearly an audience that wanted the chance to play the games of their youth.

One of the biggest problems DotEmu encountered was adapting older console games to PCs and mobile devices. For instance, games from the '90s and '80s don't lend themselves well to modern touch-screen interfaces. According to Xavier and Romain, this problem was compounded by the fact that a lot of original source code has been lost by IPs owners, forcing DotEmu to redevelop older material while developing necessary elements to enhance gameplay and provide compatibility with newer technologies. It also helps that DotEmu develops *legal* ver-

sions of retro games. In fact, Romain believes creating legal versions of old games is a core differentiator for DotEmu—one that results in more enjoyable game-play for its end users.

The Growing Popularity of Retro-games

Given how far video games have come in the past decade alone, it can be surprising to some that there is such a hunger for older games. After all, graphics, game-play, and user interfaces that were state-of-the-art in the '90s can seem primitive today. Yet Xavier and Romain understand why people enjoy playing old games. "A good game remains a good game whether it is old or not," says Romain. The dated appearance of retro-games can be deceiving. "Obviously, the graphics can look outdated," he says, "but after a few minutes, you get into the game and really appreciate what made the game successful in the past. In addition, most old games are casual in the way that you are directly into the game action and can play casually. *Sonic [the Hedgehog]* on Genesis is a good example: The minute you start playing you enjoy the game."

DotEmu has had no trouble finding a large and varied audience for its service. The team reports that on the PC digital side, most customers are between 20 and 35 years old—and about 80 percent male. Their free Flash/online games attract a much younger (12 to 20 years old) and more balanced audience (55 percent male). Their mobile audience, meanwhile, is the oldest (30 to 55 years old) and 65 percent male.

Xavier and Romain have also found that retro-gaming is an international passion. According to Xavier, "Japan, USA and Europe are the stronger markets, but there are also interesting results in Russia, Brazil, Korea and China." This growing demand for classic games has meant that DotEmu not only has to offer games for different platforms in different regions, but also in different languages—which is one of the many ways DotEmu has grown its fan base.

Keys to Success

Xavier cites several reasons for DotEmu's expanding base. One is obvious: the exclusivity that comes from maintaining your own digital store. Then, of course, there is the marketing required to drive traffic to that store. In addition, DotEmu's multi-platform approach allows it to use the free online space and mobile space to attract new users who then are introduced to the full breadth of their product line-up. Above all, says Romain, DotEmu strives to provide "high quality products—especially in the mobile space."

By creating this service, DotEmu is not only fulfilling a market demand, it is also helping to combat digital piracy. Xavier says he hasn't been surprised that a completely legal and pay-for service has managed to survive when Internet piracy makes stealing games so easy. "Piracy will always exist," he says, "and old games are no different than modern releases, movies or music. Our challenge is to provide added value to customers compared to illegal alternatives. On the PC side, we offer high download speed, easy installation with no customization required, and the protection against spyware, etc."

Xavier Liard; *Co-founder & President, DotEmu;* & Romain Tisserand; *Co-founder & CTO, DotEmu;*
Paris, France

Broken Sword: *The Shadow of the Templars*

A growing demand for classic games has meant that DotEmu not only has to offer games for different platforms in different regions, but also in different languages—which is one of the many ways DotEmu has grown its fan base.

One recent bundle of 45 Genesis games is priced $9.99 (USD), and it's selling very well.

Given the ongoing growth of the casual and mobile gaming sectors, it is unsurprising that DotEmu is focused on expanding its presence in these markets. "We want to keep the focus on old games," says Romain. "We want to be the best at what we do. And we want to keep the quality as high as reasonably possible." In other words, they want to succeed the old-fashioned way. ❊

Attack of the Clones

Battling Copyright Infringement in the Courts

Several recent court cases, including the EA vs. Zynga lawsuit and the proliferation of "cloned" games, have opened up the debate on how taking too much inspiration from existing games influences innovation in the industry—to the point that an industry body like TIGA even sent out a questionnaire on the subject to its members. The issue is now on everyone's agenda, as cloning (or "fast follow") is on the rise again with shorter development cycles on new platforms such as social and mobile. And while many creators of original concepts are unhappy, few actually take action.

In this article, we would like to focus on the legal aspects of cloning. In addition to copyright, we will point out a few alternative (supporting) strategies to protecting the investment in your game if you are in a highly competitive market that has a high risk of cloning.

The test for copyright infringement is to look at the similarities of two works, not the differences between them.

Legal Theory

The discussion on whether or not the "clone" of an "original" game is a copyright infringement usually starts with shared characteristics of the games. Depending on the games, those could be similar skin colors with the same RGB value, isometric views, weapon names, or characteristic items (such as a yoga mat).

However, the legal theory is somewhat more complex. Copyright protects works (such as the *Harry Potter* books) but not ideas (a book about a young wizard's adventures). If a game developer has taken over works from another game without permission, it infringes the original creator's copyright. If, for example, code, graphics or music is copied, we have a clear-cut infringement. It would be permissible though to use the ideas of a game, taking inspiration from it.

Applying this basic principle of copyright law to clones of computer games is more difficult, because most gamers are aware that the graphics and setting of a game are only part of the game experience. Quite often, two games share certain elements that have strong similarities, including personality types, character classes, weapon types, menu color-schemes, number of skin types, and clothing types. Even so, none of those elements is likely to qualify as a "work" under copyright law in and by itself. Plus, when concentrating on specific elements, one should also be aware of the defense that protection is often not awarded to those elements of a work that are dictated by the technical requirements for a type of product. (In a shooter, you need to have weapons, and you are bound to have machine guns. In life sims, you need to be able to pick a character, but there are only so many traditional types in a story, etc.)

The most important aspect, though, is subject to controversial discussions: whether and to which extent a game itself (the rules, unique mechanics, new genres) qualifies for protection. That is where it gets real tricky, really fast. If the games as such (their basic functioning, their settings) were to be protected, nobody would be able to make first-person shooters (for example) in which you are killing monsters in a labyrinth after *Doom,* a hack-'n-'slash RPG after *The Bard's Tale,* a side-scrolling shooter after *Defender,* or farming games after *FarmVille*—a restriction most of us wouldn't want as a matter of policy. (And we do not even know whether the evolution of racing games would have ended with *Pole Position* or with *Out Run.)*

In Search of Legal Protection

But we also have many instances in which the gameplay and setting have been clearly copied—copying that many in the industry see as poor style. Assuming that "the game" is protected, what is the essence of the game, keeping in mind that the "idea" is certainly not protected? A very technical approach would be to say that the "game" materializes in its balancing, not its setting (unless the latter is extraordinarily developed and closely copied), and that the names of items cannot be decisive, as long as they do not function in the same way.

This approach would lead to a very narrow protection. Each broader definition, however, faces the difficulty of defining what the essence of the game might be. Another problem is that the test for copy-

right infringement is to look at the similarities of two works, not the differences between them. (In the U.S., this is the "substantial similarities" test.)

While the theory is difficult to begin with, published case-law does not help a lot either. Interestingly though, the cases that we do have date from the 1980s—with the first wave of clones.

For example, back then the higher regional court of Frankfurt on the Main (Germany) held that computer games usually do not qualify for copyright protection as their economic interest would only last for a short time. Ironically, this was a case about *Donkey Kong,* and while in hindsight it is a funny case because it shows how wrong the court was, it does not help a great deal for guidance. In the Netherlands, in 1984 the higher regional court of Amsterdam ruled that *Pac-Man* was worthy of copyright protection due to infringement by *Mr. Munchkin,* a clone from Philips with slight tweaks (variable mazes, moving dots). (There are other *Pac-Man* cases in various countries with very diverging criteria and outcomes.)

Pac-Man vs. *Mr. Munchkin,* different in detail but still copyright infringement.

And although the same principles still apply, we haven't seen that many cases since the 1980s—in part because some of the more interesting cases have been settled under non-disclosure agreements (such as the infamous *Super Mario Bros.* vs. *Great Giana Sisters* case). Rumor has it that the latter was found to be an infringement on Nintendo's rights, but no official confirmation is available. Still, it should be possible to get more precedents against rip-offs.

What we have found out in practice, though, is that some cases hinge on somewhat banal elements, like the number of items required to upgrade in a particular menu, the fantasy name of in-game soft currency or an animal. It remains an open question: If and when will the courts start to look more closely at game-play or at specific elements of the game? Until then the outcome of such cases is relatively open—apart from cases in which graphics, music, databases or computer programs have been copied—as long as they are based on copyright.

Unfair Competition

Luckily for first makers, however, there is a residual tort (in Germany and The Netherlands at least) for unfair competition. If the original product is very distinctive, then the law offers some protection against misappropriation. The rule of thumb would be that the more famous and the more "distinctive" the "original" is, and the closer the "copy," the more likely there is an infringement. While this seems vague as well, the elements "famous" and "distinctive" do help.

All in all, and according to our personal experience, all theory is gray, and most judges' knowledge of computer games is limited. This means that they often do not have a finer understanding of what the essence of the game might be, and they tend to decide according to rather superficial similarities (or the lack of them). Thus, we have even experienced a case in which the claimant's lawyer argued that his client's "original" and the defendant's alleged copy both had horizontal navigation with a link to the home screen on the top left. We even won a case mainly because the vehicles on the cover of the game box were the same color and in the same position.

The Wider Angle

Despite these uncertainties, creators of original games should be aware that they have a whole range of options. Since with online services the party that sues can freely choose the country in which to litigate the case, it makes sense to start a lawsuit in a place where you think you can win—especially since you can quickly get temporary injunctions (in a matter of days), including in countries like Germany and the Netherlands. For games offered over a platform such as an App Store or Facebook, you may even have a competitors' App pulled without any court decision (even though it helps a lot to have one). So if you want better leverage against infringers, you should think beyond copyright, and beyond borders.

You may also register a design right or a trademark (maybe even your games' characters, server names, or characteristic spells) in various countries. It might make sense to register a copyright in the U.S., for example, for game screens (not possible in Europe), or a patent if there is a technical invention (again, this is easier in the U.S. than in Europe).

And while you can register more rights in the U.S., Europe often is a safer, quicker and cheaper place to litigate. No wonder the first chapter of the Apple vs. Samsung saga was litigated in Germany. Plus, the concept of unfair competition seems to be stronger in Europe, and with pretty substantial case-law to guide you.

So if you think your rights are being infringed upon, look abroad if in your country costs are too high or chances too low. ❊

by Dr. Andreas Lober;
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Frankfurt, Germany
&
by Olivier Oosterbaan;
Lawyer, Create Law;
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Most judges' knowledge of computer games is limited. This means that they often do not have a finer understanding of what the essence of the game might be, and they tend to decide according to rather superficial similarities (or the lack of them).

Games for Real Life

Opening the Untapped Market of "Life Gamers"

If I had one wish, it would be for a roundtrip in a Deorean with a built-in time machine. I'd travel back to the year 2000, drive 10 minutes from my house to the offices of PopCap Games in downtown Seattle, and write them a check for $65,000 to buy the *Bejeweled* game they were offering when nobody else was interested. After returning to 2012, I'd take my portion of the $1.3 billion acquisition from Electronic Arts and set enough aside so I'd never *have* to work again. Then, I'd invest the rest in serving another emerging market: the market of "Life Gamers."

Juice

We Have What They Need

Life Gamers are the rapidly growing segment of 150+ million Gen X and Y consumers who have grown up with games as entertainment—people who are now looking to technology to improve their health, relationships, careers, and finances and *desperately* want more fun, simple, and effective ways to do it.

This emerging market is currently underserved by an archaic self-help industry that, despite its $11 billion annual market value, still struggles to embrace technology. I believe there is a huge opportunity for game developers to do a jiu-jitsu move and leverage the power of technology, social networks, and the science of games to capitalize on this emerging market—allowing us to improve not only *virtual* lives, but *real* lives as well.

We are a unique breed of professionals with the talent, passion, creativity, and perseverance to blend technology with art in ways that keep people engaged and sometimes even "addicted" to our creations—and we have created a $25 billion game industry to prove it. Games keep players engaged by satisfying the human psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy—psychological needs that are *not* being met by the self-help industry. While I value the wisdom of the experts in that field, they are just not equipped to create the interactive experiences Life Gamers are expecting.

Inspiration Born from Experience

My desire to solve this problem was inspired my own experience in the game industry. Before I founded Mindbloom, I was as an Executive Producer for the game development studio Monolith Productions. I had the privilege of working with an amazing and talented group of game developers to create award-winning PC titles such as *No One Lives Forever, Aliens vs. Predator 2, Tron 2.0.* I left Monolith after finishing our blockbuster hit game, *F.E.A.R.* Our specialty was making highly-immersive, cinematic, action-movie experiences. We expertly combined our game's visuals, audio, music, and storyline to effectively trig-

ger human emotions—something I think is missing from the recent "gamification" trend. Like a good movie, our games created an emotion that drew people in. As the Producer of *F.E.A.R.*, I saw firsthand that our audience was even addicted to the emotion of *fear.*

As fun as it was to create award-winning games, the intensity of game development took a toll. I was neglecting my health, relationships, and passions outside of work; and eventually I lost my sense of purpose. What turned me around was delving deep into self-help books and having the perseverance to follow through with the recommendations from the authors. Over the course of a year, I not only climbed out of my depression, but I ended up with a healthier and more balanced life.

This personal transformation convinced me that *anyone* can improve the quality of their life. I didn't have the concept of a Life Gamer at that time, but I intuitively felt that this generation was not likely to engage with self-help content the way it was being delivered. Except for the most self-disciplined, reading books, listening to audio CDs, attending seminars, and browsing "infomercial websites" was not going to *engage* them long enough to make a difference. It was this realization that inspired me to create Mindbloom, a company focused on blending technology and art to make the life-improvement process more engaging. There was tremendous room for improvement in how we delivered "expert content," and I wanted to deliver a fun, simple, and effective way for us Life Gamers to achieve our personal goals.

Games keep players engaged by satisfying the human psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy—psychological needs that are *not* being met by the self-help industry.

A Game with a Purpose

It was around this time that the popular WiiFit and Nike+ products were released. Witnessing their huge market success validated my already strong belief that people not only needed, but *craved* more engaging ways to improve the quality of their lives. However, I wanted to expand beyond fitness and create experiences that facilitated people's desire to improve their *whole* lives.

In 2008, years before the term "gamification" became all the rage it is today, we began prototyping our first Life Improvement web application called the *Life Game.* The *Life Game* was designed to use the visual metaphor of growing a "life tree" to inspire people to focus on what's important (health, relationships, career, finances, etc.), helping them in the process to find motivation through inspirational media. Our ultimate purpose was to help them keep their "life tree" healthy by taking small steps towards their goals. We knew we were onto something when we gave a sneak preview of the early prototype to our target market. One woman we interviewed was brought to tears because she was so moved by the fact that we were making a "game-like" product that actually was designed for people to live their best life.

by Chris Hewett;
Founder & Executive Producer, Mindbloom;
Seattle, WA

Bloom*

We gradually raised enough money to build-out the *Life Game.* With a very small development team, we released our first beta. After adding game features such as virtual currency, badges, and power-ups, we saw a 30 percent increase in user completion rates of their daily commitments towards their goals. After a few more iterations, we launched the *Life Game* in late 2011. With virtually no marketing, the *Life Game* user-base organically grew to approximately 80,000 registered users. Suddenly, we were getting calls from wellness consumer brands, health insurance companies, life coaches, and expert bloggers who wanted us to help them make their products and content more engaging for consumers. We knew we were at the forefront of an emerging market, but we also knew there was a lot more to learn. Some of our early insights included:

- ***There is no one-size-fits all.***
  We all have unique tastes and personalities. As much as we wanted the *Life Game's* tree metaphor to appeal to everyone, we knew it was going to appeal only to a limited audience.
- ***People are mobile.***
  And mobile devices are where more and more people are spending their time. This is why today we are focusing more of our time on creating our applications for mobile devices.
- ***Make it "bite-size."***
  Most people have only a few spare moments in their busy day to engage in apps and games. People are more and more distracted, and it's critical that we create experiences that fit into their tiny windows of opportunity.
- ***Life-improvement products have a limited life-cycle.***
  Like games, life improvement apps have a limited life-cycle. People will move onto the next shiny, cool thing. Fortunately, this is good from a business perspective.

Mobile Alternatives

With these lessons in our back pocket, we have begun developing them in our next series of applications. Featured on LifeHacker.com, *Bloom** was our first iPhone app that became an even bigger success for Mindbloom. With approximately 300,000 downloads, the *Bloom** app was our simplified experience for mobile that focused on keeping what's important in our lives top-of-mind through the use of "inspirational reminders" that play back personalized music, photos, and captions relating to a person's specific goals in any area of life. *Bloom** has now received over 500 ratings in iTunes, averaging 4.5 stars. We consistently read positive comments from our users regarding the emotional power of the combined visual and musical features of the application.

As I write this article, our third application, *Juice—the World's Funnest Energy Tracker,* has cracked the Top 10 Free Health & Wellness iPhone applications. Unlike other health applications that are designed for the "hardcore" data trackers, *Juice* is designed for the "casual" audience of people who want to be healthy but don't have time to track every detail of their day. Already *Juice* has tripled the number of downloads *Bloom** had at launch. This desire from our users to have more fun, simple and effective applications for improving the quality of their lives is what keeps us fueled on our journey through the uncharted territory of the Life Gamer market. With the advances of mobile technology, biometric devices, and whatever else comes around the corner, there is tremendous opportunity for us game developers to be more creative and to design revolutionary experiences that engage people and enhance their *real* lives.

The good news is that you don't need a time machine to take advantage of this growing Life Gamer market. You already know how to make consumer experiences that are engaging and emotional. You can take those unique talents and apply them toward an opportunity to make money or to make positive difference in the world. Better yet, now you have an opportunity to do both. ❇

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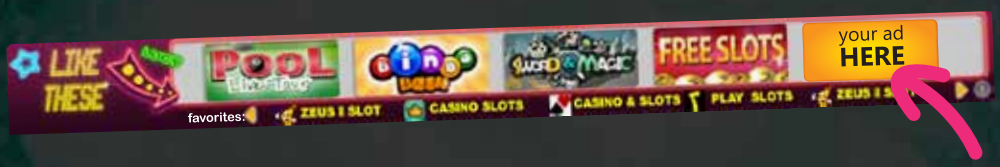

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Books Meet Videogames

A Conversation about *Infinity Ring*

***Infinity Ring* is a new book series by Scholastic. This series will follow three kids as they travel through time to correct historical moments that have been altered by a centuries-long secret war. *Infinity Ring* is one of a few stories being told through books and interconnected online games with immersive open-world environments.**

To find out more about this merging of traditional and new media, we spoke with Scholastic's Gavin Brown, who oversees *Infinity Ring's* online and mobile gaming, and Nick Eliopulos, the editor for the series.

How do you want people to think of *Infinity Ring?* Is it a book series with a videogame component or a videogame series with accompanying books?

GAVIN: We present it as a book and online game series in which each platform is equal and stands on its own. The story weaves seamlessly from the books to the game and back to the books.

NICK: *Infinity Ring* is a cool time-travel adventure story that happens to be told through different media, in satisfying installments that all add up to one big adventure.

How did this idea come about?

NICK: A small group of editors batted around the initial idea at the core of the story: What if history had been manipulated so that key events had gone wrong? And what if a few kids had the ability to travel back in time to fix those Great Breaks in history? We didn't go much deeper than that before talking to James Dashner, a tremendous writer with a real knack for speculative fiction (and who happens to be a bit of a history geek). James took that nugget of an idea and ran with it, developing an extensive outline, including a list of potential Great Breaks. As soon as we had a sense of the scope of the story, and saw how the Breaks allowed pretty naturally for an episodic structure, we looped in Gavin and his team to see if they agreed this story would benefit from the larger canvas that multi-platform allows.

GAVIN: The editorial team came to us with this idea, and we constructed a game around it. As soon as I read the description I knew that it had to be a classic adventure game, similar to the old Sierra and LucasArts games that I played as a kid. This series is all about history and the story, and required building a completely new game engine to allow us to build all seven episodes in a little more than two years.

What resources did the authors and game designers use to make sure that the details were historically accurate?

GAVIN: Historical accuracy is a major goal for our multi-platform team. This was a major challenge because a game can include a huge number of details that won't fit into a book. For 1792 Paris, we wrestled with questions like *What sort of curbs did the streets have?* and *What exactly does an 18th century glass cutter look like?* We made trips to New York's architectural and art libraries in order to produce a section of the city that's both accurate and full of life. And then immediately we had to move on to Washington D.C. in 1812.

NICK: The authors have been able to rely on more traditional means of research, for the reasons Gavin outlines. But they absolutely want kids to come away with a genuine sense of these settings and historical figures. James Dashner portrays Columbus as a bit of smug, unlikeable character because historical accounts paint him that way. In the second book, author Carrie Ryan was careful to describe a Danish Viking ship rather than a Norwegian one. It was an important distinction that I wouldn't have picked up on before we started our research.

Each book also comes with a "Hystorian's Guide," which is a strategy guide to a game episode. Since those are so visual (even including historically accurate maps), they've required a crazy amount of

research. For our Revolutionary Paris guide, we ended up buying centuries-old French currency from eBay so that we could include an image of the real deal.

Although authors have unlimited options of how to tell their stories, game designers are limited by processing power, production time and budgets. How were these limitations addressed?

GAVIN: Everything designed in the *Infinity Ring* game had to be built with the limitations of the device in mind. For example, there can only be a limited number of characters on screen at any time, which means there can't be any crowd scenes. We're fortunate that most devices nowadays can handle great 3D graphics, but we're constantly adjusting to keep the level of detail and file size low enough that loading screens and downloads won't take too long. Creating great looking visuals is hard enough—doing so within limitations of polygon count and texture size is an art form with its own rules and secrets.

We have a toolset for building the plot that is very effective, but it requires that everything fit into a certain framework. We have a great team here at Scholastic that is up for the challenge of working within the limitations of technology to create a story that's engaging, exciting, and at times sidesplittingly funny.

So has an author ever suggested a storyline that was rejected because it would have been too difficult to include in the game?

NICK: Fortunately the episodes really do stand on their own well enough that we haven't had this issue. The authors have been able to run wild with their own stories.

But while plotting the overall arc we did run up against the differences between what works in a book and what works in a game. Many of those differences are obvious in hindsight, but weren't necessarily obvious to me in the early stages. For example, the subplots running through the story—where one character is keeping an important secret from the others, for instance—fit much more naturally into the books. The game episodes by their nature are driven by dialogue and action and don't slow down for introspection.

You often hear writers advised: "Show, don't tell." Writing a game is the ultimate expression of this.

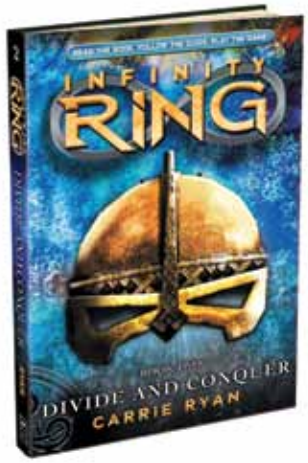
Scholastic also published *The 39 Clues* book series which also had an Internet game component. How did the lessons learned from the production of *The 39 Clues* inform the development of *Infinity Ring?*

GAVIN: *The 39 Clues* was a huge learning experience for us. We had to learn from the ground up how to design a book and game simultaneously. It requires frequent communication, constant learning, and collaboration with a team that understands both worlds. Additionally, fans on *The 39 Clues* message boards have been a tremendous advantage in helping us understand how they think and what they want. *Infinity Ring* was all-new technology, but the expertise built up from *The 39 Clues* was crucial in ensuring a smooth launch.

Gavin Brown; *Associate Director, Scholastic;* **New York, NY;**
& Nick Eliopulos; *Editor, Infinity Ring Series;* **Brookfield, IL**

Three main characters: Dak, Sera, and Riq are the three children who travel through time, fixing history.

1792 Revolutionary France is the setting for the first video game installment of *Infinity Ring*. This episode is called, "The King of Diamonds."



NICK: Scholastic broke new ground with *The 39 Clues,* the first multi-platform series in children's book publishing. This popular series now has more than 15 million copies in print worldwide and more than two million registered users in the online game. Those are just amazing figures. We've had great success in the multi-platform space and we've learned a lot since we published *The 39 Clues* series in 2008. The best professional advice I ever received was from an editor of *The 39 Clues*. She told me: *Look, nobody is an expert yet when it comes to multi-platform publishing. So have fun—don't be afraid to share crazy ideas. It's a new frontier, a level playing field, where you know as much as anybody else in the room.*

But we have definitely benefited from the experience of the *Clues* pioneers. And I'm consistently in awe of the work they've done. That story gets bigger and bigger, without losing any of the excitement or momentum it has had since launching years ago. They've built a wonderful mythology that books alone simply wouldn't be able to contain.

A recent study conducted by Bowker Market Research found that 55 percent of Young Adult books are purchased by adults, and 78 percent of these adults are buying these YA books for themselves. Do you feel that this aging demographic will influence how Scholastic produces books?

NICK: I love that adults enjoy so many of the books we publish. I think it's a great indication that children's publishing is where you're seeing a lot of innovation. And Scholastic in particular is very interested in continuing to innovate. There's a big emphasis here on creativity and on making reading fun—for kids in particular. But if adults pick up on that message, that's all the better.

We'll continue to go where the kids are. That increasingly means multi-platform. And while I don't see adult interest influencing the work that we do, I think that the work we do will continue to interest adults.

Some say that e-books and other electronic media are pushing printed text toward extinction. Do think video games or e-books will ever cause the printed word to disappear?

NICK: Absolutely not. What we're seeing now is that e-books and electronic publishing are broadening our audience instead of replacing it. The reading public has more options now—in an age where consumers want options. There will always be a place for printed books. Now there's a place for electronic books, too. Put them together and you're reaching more readers than printed books alone ever would.

As for video games, the trap people fall into is thinking of it as a zero-sum game, as if every kid with an interest in games is a lost reader. I don't believe that's true. Personally, I'm a big reader. I love to read. But sometimes I'd rather play a game or watch a movie. As a consumer, I like to vary the media through which I enjoy stories in my leisure time. I don't believe I'm unusual in that.

With more story franchises being told across multiple media, how do you two think storytelling might change in the 21st century?

GAVIN: Storytelling will be in all sorts of new places and across multiple new media, but the basics of it will never change. One of the great things about Scholastic is that writing and storytelling are always a priority. There will always be an audience for great stories.

NICK: It's such an incredibly exciting time to be a storyteller. Or to work in an industry committed to building bridges between a storyteller and an audience. It feels as if the horizons are expanding. Skillsets are diversifying. Innovation and creativity are being rewarded.

But Gavin's got it right. The fundamentals remain the same. And there will always be an audience for gifted storytellers, whatever the medium.

Finally, what can fans look forward to from *Infinity Ring* and Scholastic in the near future?

NICK: Book 2 in the series, *Divide and Conquer,* came out in November. It hinges on an epic medieval siege. Its author, Carrie Ryan, is best known for her intense horror-adventure series, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth.* There are no zombies in *Divide and Conquer,* but she does create some truly terrifying Vikings. Books 3, 4, and 5 are all scheduled to come out in 2013.

GAVIN: For Episode 2 of the *Infinity Ring* game, we're going to save the American First Lady from British redcoats in the War of 1812. We'll then head to Japan to learn the Bushido Code and help a famous Samurai survive Ninja assassins in Episode 3. Beyond that—we're always looking one step ahead to the next big thing. But for the moment our focus is on delivering an Episode of *Infinity Ring* that lives up to the epic story that we have tell.

NICK: And when wondering what comes next, kids should keep an eye out for hints within the story, too. There's a reason that our otherwise historically accurate recreation of Paris in the online game includes a Viking statue right outside Notre Dame. ❇

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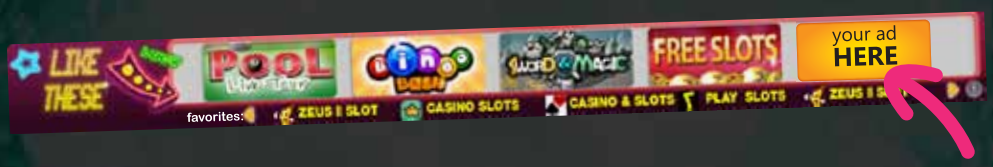

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by Oscar Clark;
Evangelist, Applifier;
Aldershot, UK

Six Degrees of Socialization

Creating Outcomes That Exceed Expectations

The introduction of social games heralded an unprecedented increase in the size of the audience for online and mobile games, as we saw mass-market users for the first time embracing casual games. More recently, social gaming pioneers like Zynga have stumbled, but rather than signalling the end of the line for social games, I believe this is just the start.

Understanding the role of social elements in games ultimately comes down to understanding people and relationships. Unfortunately, a lot of the content we see simply builds on previous successes rather than looking at what is happening and assessing how social mechanisms work—whether you are playing a Facebook game like *FarmVille 2* or a hardcore MMORPG like *World of Warcraft.*

Each player will have a set of expectations which will create an outcome for each game session that may have little to do with any success they associate with the essential play of the game.

Principles of Socialization

Let's start with some basic principles. What elements are at work when people communicate online? The simplest case I can think of is the infamous Facebook "Poke." This feature is a little more hidden nowadays, but it is still possible to select the Poke button and send a simple message to your friend.

Poking someone is a transfer of information; it says: "Hey, I thought about you today." It doesn't require reciprocation; it's not demanding. You can choose to respond, inviting further interactions, or you can hide the notification. Facebook even has a simple and effective anti-spamming mechanism included preventing you from resending a Poke until the other party responds. If I poke you and you don't poke me back, that's that.

What's most profound is the realization that the meaning of a Poke to the recipient is independent of the action itself and entirely subjective to your relationship with the sender. When I Poke my wife, it's an act of love; when I Poke my friend, it's more likely a reminder to meet me at the pub; and when I Poke someone who owes me money….

Interdependence Theory at Work

So, to take this further we have to think about how relationships work and consider the game as the medium for communications. I think we can use Interdependence Theory as a useful tool to explain how games can understand the relationship between players as they happen inside a game. This theory looks at why some people have happy relationship experiences and yet have unstable relationships, while other relationships can be stable despite the unhappiness of their participants. This concept was first introduced way back in 1959 by Harold Kelley and John Thibaut in their book *The Social Psychology of Groups.*

We all know that the way we feel about a relationship depends on the love, friendship and affection we gain from it compared with the effort we expend to maintain it. Think of that as the "outcome" of the relationship. At the same time, we bring to each relationship a set of "expectations." We don't expect as much from some friends as from others, and in some relationships (with family members in particular) we are often willing to put up with a reduced "outcome." According to the theory, then, "satisfaction" with a relationship comes when the "outcome" exceeds the "expectation."

To complicate matters, as social animals we inevitably compare the outcomes we are getting from our relationships to the outcomes that others are getting from theirs, and those comparisons affect our expectations as well. In the end, we may even find that when we set our expectations unrealistically high we can become unhappy with what otherwise might be the best possible relationship.

This way of thinking is very relevant to social games. Our players have a relationship not only with the game but with the other players of that game. Each player will have a set of expectations which will create an outcome for each game session that may have little to do with any success they associate with the essential play of the game. Whether they continue playing is dependant not just on players' satisfaction with the game itself, but also on their social relationships and their expectations of alternative services which might otherwise satisfy their playing needs.

Emotional and Social Implications

All of this is further complicated by the emotions of the players. Specifically, in games we need to understand how players emotionally respond to the gameplay and the effect of the social context in which the game is played. Satisfaction may be influenced by intrinsic (practical) factors such as the ability to fill unoccupied time or the ability to participate in a shared interest with friends. At the same time, satisfaction may also be influenced by opportunity factors such as what the player should be doing instead. Each of these may positively or negatively affect a player's commitment to playing our game. If we fail to consider these issues we will fail to reach the potential value that socialization can have for our game.

In the end there are two factors we can control: how entertaining the game is, and how easy it is for players to share and communicate in the game. If we can reduce the effort required to socialize then we have a chance to increase the engagement with our audience.

Of course, from a cynical perspective, one might be fooled into thinking that the player's experience doesn't have to be entirely positive; as long as outcome exceeds expectation, the player will keep on playing. Or perhaps we might say that our players will keep on playing our game provided that their expectations of other available games are sufficiently low. I'm not suggesting that anyone deliberately sets out to make a bad game; but there are many prominent examples of complacency, even among high-profile social games.

What I am suggesting is that in the end there are two factors we can control: how entertaining the game is, and how easy it is for players to share and communicate in the game. If we can reduce the effort required to socialize then we have a chance to increase the engagement with our audience.

Six Degrees of Socialization

To help us understand how this works, I've developed the Six Degrees of Socialization—six core differentiating levels of social interaction which provide a lens through which developers can examine the engagement and benefits of their games as well as the social effort expected of those who play them.

» ***THE FIRST DEGREE—"Look at Me Play"***

Allows players to communicate that they are playing a game—and nothing more. This might be a simple Facebook push or perhaps a video post of my game-play (such as Everyplay from Applifier). It communicates a moment from my game-play, likely one of success, and invites others to participate. The effort required is next to nothing, and the ability to show off moments of success is often accompanied by in-game rewards, resulting in sweet benefit potential. There is also an element of pride at play—that is, players have an inherent expectation that sharing success will show their association with the game and thereby demonstrate something worthwhile to their social network.

» ***THE SECOND DEGREE—"I Can See You Play"***

Allows players to see each other playing the game, such as an ability to visit each other's farm, armory, garage or other personalized space. This provides a sense of comparison within the gaming experience—much like a leaderboard—and can be a great motivator for players to demonstrate their skills or creative abilities in-game. The effort required is greater than the first degree but still relatively trivial. Plus, this type of socialization does not carry the expectation of direct interaction.

» ***THE THIRD DEGREE—"I Beat Your Score"***

Starts to mix things up as we now are looking to create genuine interactions between players. These are typically the results of actions rather than deliberate decisions in themselves—showing high scores and the act of "levelling up," for example. There is almost always a bragging element to this (imagine that), and although the response is generally competitive, that's not always appropriate for every game or genre. Instead, in social games, the challenge is for players to keep returning, playing and interacting with other players in-game. The third degree of socialization will elicit this reaction if effective.

» ***THE FOURTH DEGREE—"Lets Collaborate"***

Starts to build up an expectation of reciprocation. As we start to collaborate, players need to start relying on each other's contributions in order to build stronger bonds and long-term

loyalty. Socialization that requires this type of "nurturing" obviously takes more effort than that in previous degrees, with an added issue that relationships can quickly collapse if other players fail to sustain the activity.

» ***THE FIFTH DEGREE—"Go Head-to-Head"***
Accelerates the degree of engagement and directly pits the actions of one player against another. This can be incrementally more enjoyable (and intense), but it requires an existing level of commitment. Fortunately, if in place, that commitment will sufficiently offset any negative experiences. In a real-time game experience, the increase in effort needed to sustain relationships is even greater, so without a critical mass of users, it may be impossible to interact at this degree at all. Many games, particularly in the FPS genre, encourage players to go straight into this kind of experience, but that will inevitably skew your user-base toward players already pre-disposed to the game (and genre). To expand beyond this niche, consider building the socialization more gradually.

» ***THE SIXTH DEGREE—"We Are Guild"***
Takes socialization to its ultimate level where the social experience goes beyond the game and the game becomes merely a chosen method of communication. At this level, players generally use social tools in the game to manage and schedule their experiences together. They actively plan to participate synchronously, perhaps at regular times of the week, or even daily! The benefits of these real-world connections can be highly rewarding, but the effort needed to sustain them is equally high. Only the most dedicated of player groups will sustain them, but these are the same groups who'll be your greatest asset, if you let them. Given the right in-game tools, loyal players will provide the social "glue" you need to sustain interest from less committed players.

This isn't intended as a definitive guide. However, it reflects behavior I have seen over 14 years of working with online entertainment and communities. Traditionally, developers address a specific Degree as their target experience (think of real-time multiplayer, for example), which can be effective but which always reduces to potential size of the audience. The question that remains to be asked is, "What could we do if we took our audience with us through each of these degree?". Very few games have even started that journey. ❊

The Six Degrees of Socialization are six core differentiating levels of social interaction which provide a lens through which developers can examine the engagement and benefits of their games as well as the social effort expected of those who play them.

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Now We Are Talking

Stephen Griffin talks about Eyes Wide Games and *The Walking Dead* Franchise

Stephen Griffin is a 13-year veteran of the video game industry. After earning a BA in Fine Arts at Furman University, and an MFA in Design & Technology at Parsons School of Design, Griffin gained experience as a software engineer, art director, game designer, and instructor before founding Eyes Wide Games with Kevin Griffin in 2007. His career has ranged from Cartoon Network, where he worked as a Senior Designer, to The Art Institute of Atlanta, where he was a member of the faculty.

With elements of strategy and survival-horror, *The Walking Dead* Social Game allows players and their friends to experience the *The Walking Dead* in a unique and interactive manner.

You got a BA in Fine Art and then received an MFA. Did you get these degrees with the intent of going into the video game industry?

At the time, there was no clear path into the industry except computer science, so I never considered it until graduate school. I sort of stumbled into the industry based on my interests, and I have been stumbling into new opportunities within it ever since. My brother (Kevin Griffin, Eyes Wide Games' co-owner) and I have always been very passionate about both video and board games, though neither of us ever discussed going into game development—much less starting a company together—until the opportunity presented itself.

Has teaching at The Art Institute of Atlanta helped you further master any of your skills? And has learning how to explain things in the classroom helped you with employees?

Absolutely. It helped me clarify and structure my many loose and often incongruous ideas and processes. The classroom provides a very efficient and rewarding feedback loop for that type of activity. It also has helped me learn how to structure work and play for groups of people—when to lead and when to challenge someone to venture into the deep-end of the pool of uncertainty.

Stephen Griffin;
CEO/Studio Director, Eyes Wide Games;
Atlanta, GA

Set in a world in which the dead have risen and are called "Walkers" instead of zombies, the ethos of *The Walking Dead* is to examine our world after it collapses, and how people try to survive and rebuild.

Over the course of your career in the video game industry, what are some of the things you've learned that you wish someone had taught you in school?
Looking back, I wish I could have come to grips with the nuances of business earlier in my career, but perhaps that would have taken the place of some other experience. Overall, I am happy with my journey thus far. I've had chances to be a visual artist, a programmer, an industrial designer, a game designer, a teacher, and now a business leader.

Have you noticed a skill-set or behavior you want to see in younger employees?
At Eyes Wide Games, we look for individuals who are self-starters, who are willing to push past the first few ideas to see the system, who are comfortable figuring out how to move forward in unclear situations, and, most importantly, who still want to learn.

What do you mean by "system" in this context?
Every idea is situated in a larger system of constraints, affordances, and requirements. If you understand those, you can come up with a larger variety of other appropriate ideas. However, you have to be willing to work at identifying the system and not just perfecting the first ideas.

From Large Animal Games to Cartoon Network, you had a great career working for other people. What was it that made you want to start your own company?
I've always wanted to chart and travel my own course. Prior to Eyes Wide Games, we attempted to start and run a business. Fresh out of school and with one year of work experience, we failed due to our lack of experience and perhaps our environment (9/11-era New York City). After spending several years working for a wide variety of digital creative companies, we decided the time was right to give it another go. We've had

Stephen Griffin talks about *The Walking Dead*

Set in the Las Vegas of CSI, *CSI: Crime City* allows to create an original character to solve crimes. With over 2 million users, it is one of Eyes Wide Games and Ubisoft's most successful games.

some lucky business breaks from some good friends in the industry, and we've done a good job at taking advantage of those opportunities. We are gradually building up to the ability to take a few swings at original IP products without putting our business in jeopardy.

When building your company, what were some of the distinct ways you wanted to differentiate Eyes Wide Games from other gaming companies?

Honestly, we did not think of ourselves in contrast to other game companies. We really thought of Eyes Wide Games more like a young organism in a primordial soup. From the people we hire, to the way we structure work, to the types of projects we work on, it's really been about incrementally moving forward as a company—technically, creatively, and financially—without getting stuck in an area that does not have the right business conditions for a small company that is self-funded.

When people think of the South, they rarely think of it as a home for video game studios. What are some of the benefits of establishing a company in Atlanta, Georgia as opposed to the New York area or the West Coast?

It's been great starting and growing a game studio in Atlanta. While there is not a wealth of experienced game developers in the area, there are some really good schools here supplying very passionate engineers, artists, and designers. However, with new developers comes inexperience, so we had to adjust our processes initially to accommodate for that. It is a very different story now that everyone's had a chance to work on several projects over the past several years.

Eyes Wide Games started in 2007, and a few years later the economy tanked. How did you handle the economic downturn?

That was a tough time. We had to put our original IP plans on the shelf while we focused on client-funded game projects. Fortunately, we picked up a stream of great projects that allowed us to flourish. We now have a great team with great technology. We look forward to this upcoming year as we move into social mobile games.

We worked very closely with AMC on every detail of the game so it wasn't just on-brand—it actually extends the brand. The game fills in the blanks between TV seasons, character backstories, and sometimes even TV scenes.

Eyes Wide Games has made games for several television shows, with your company's most recent adaptation being *The Walking Dead*. How did you go about designing this Facebook game so that it provided a unique experience, but with the TV show's style and tone?

We worked very closely with AMC on every detail of the game so it wasn't just on-brand—it actually extends the brand. The game fills in the blanks between TV seasons, character backstories, and sometimes even TV scenes. It's a very challenging process because there are so many constraints that you have to understand in order to know the size and shape of your canvas. It's completely different from working on an original IP. There is a significant risk that you will just trace the dots of the existing IP, which results in a product that isn't very interesting for the players or the developers.

Given that the show was based on a comic book series, did you ever use *The Walking Dead* comics as reference points for the game?

Even prior to working on the game, most members of the team were huge fans of the Robert Kirkman's comic. The game is based on AMC's *The Walking Dead* series. If it looked like the comic, players would be confused about plot lines, characters, and other variations. Naturally, going from real actors and locations to a game required us to illustrate and animate the elements. This required lots of exploration. It was a challenging journey to arrive at the current look and feel, but the team did a great job.

Based on the popular A&E series, *Storage Wars: The Game* is designed to compete against your friends for storage lockers and the possible treasures inside.

Stephen Griffin talks about *The Walking Dead*

***The Walking Dead* is known for filling its fans with suspense because, at any moment, a beloved or hated character could die or be seriously wounded. How did you go about trying to mimic that tension while still keeping the game's tone fun and casual?**
That has been a muse for constant iteration. We explored perma-death for characters. We explored various "fogs of wars" and various walker surprise tactics. We explored various mechanics for attacks that place success or failure in the player's hands for a tense experience while remaining casual. There has been continual iteration which bounces the game back and forth between being too hard for a wide audience and close to what we want.

Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* won game of the year at the 2012 VGA. How do you think of Eyes Wide Games' *The Walking Dead* in relationship to Telltale's?
That's great for Telltale Games. We have a lot of respect for their approach. Telltale's game is based on the comic. Our game is based on AMC's TV show and is also uniquely designed for success on Facebook and other social media platforms.

Eyes Wide Games' *The Walking Dead* has proven to be a big hit. As a matter of fact, I haven't met one person yet who has disliked it.
Thank you. We've worked hard to make this type of game viable on a platform like Facebook, where the only types of really successful games are building, farming, collecting, RTS-based strategy, match-three variations, hidden object, and gambling-oriented games. It has taken lots of iteration.

How do you see Eyes Wide Games building on this success?
In regard to the future, we are making the jump from game-as-service on the web to mobile. We've got some exciting things coming up for that space. It also looks like we are finally going to pull our original aspirations out of the time capsule and make some new games with our own IP. I can't say much more, but it appears that this next year is going to be our most creatively rewarding year yet. Cheers.

Inspired by the popular BBC series, *Top Gear: Speed World* allows players to race against their friends in vehicles ranging from tanks to golf carts.

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